

Revelation 3:1-6 A Hollow Faith

A sermon delivered at Calvary Chapel DC Metro
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This morning we're looking at the fifth of seven churches that Jesus sent an evaluation by the hand of His disciple John.

We've noticed the letters tend to follow a predictable pattern: they open by telling us something about Jesus, then offer a commendation for what's going on at the church, a criticism of something that needs to be fixed, and a promise of what's to come for those who are faithful. But this morning, we're dealing with a disappointing exception. The sad church in Sardis receives no commendation. Jesus actually has nothing good to say to them.

Read with me and we'll discover more:

1 "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."'

So you see: nothing good to say, just a warning. Jesus says, "I know that you're not what other people think you are. I know you're dead and dying." How can you be both? I think of it like a fruit tree that isn't doing well – it's dead in the sense that it isn't producing any fruit, but it's not completely dead – there's still a bit of life in it, still a few leaves on the branches, there's just not enough to do what the tree is supposed to do, which is produce fruit. But remember, that's what Jesus sees because He sees things as they really are. What everyone else sees is something different.

So, let me ask you a question. How do you picture the church in Sardis? If these letters were addressed to seven churches today – and Sardis was being admonished to strengthen the things that remain, the things that are almost dead, what kind of church do you picture? Do you think of some small little chapel, a tiny dilapidated shack with a half a dozen people gathered for worship? Is that what you think of when you imagine a dying church?

You might. But remember one very important thing – the church in Sardis had a reputation; they had a name – a name that they were alive, they were vibrant, they had things going on. What would a church that has a reputation look like today? It would probably be a big church, with a parking lot ministry, multiple services, and a prominent building. You see, this was a church people had heard of. I don't imagine this as a small insignificant congregation. I think it was a church that looked good from the outside.

I think of Sardis as the church of the hollow chocolate bunny. You know what I'm talking about, right? It's a disappointment that's almost a rite of passage in America. Easter comes around and you get a basket full of goodies and perched there in the back, towering over shredded strips of green plastic grass, a few dyed eggs, and a six pack of yellow Peeps is a chunk of chocolate in the shape of a bunny. And something inside of you is salivating. You can't wait to open it – it's the biggest piece of chocolate anyone has ever given you.

You open it up, and maybe one of the hard candy eyes falls off – that's no big deal – you're here for the chocolate – you hold that thing up and take a bite out of the ear, and you crunch right through empty space. It's not solid, it's empty, a hollow shell of what you hoped for. It's not fair.

So, you put it down and peel the foil off your Cadbury egg instead, which is full of some kind of sugary syrupy approximation of an egg white and yoke that you half eat, half drink and you stew over your disappointment.

The church in Sardis was like that chocolate bunny – it looked promising from the outside, but inside it was hollow. The church had a name, a reputation, of being very spiritual, but Jesus said the truth was, they were struggling and not far from death.

The sad thing is, this problem hasn't gone away. Too many churches and too many Christians are thin, empty shells with no substance or strength. They look great on the outside, but there's nothing inside to back it all up. Friends, don't be drawn in by the big flashy show when you're looking for a church, look deep inside and find out what's really going on.

I've said many times, we're not a big church; we're not a fancy church. But we're a good church. We don't offer an event every night of the week, or a laser light show during worship. We don't offer theater style chairs or 500 other people your age. But we do offer you the Word of God week by week and a chance to grow in fellowship with Jesus and other believers. That's not to say big flashy ministries are all hollow facades - not at all - I'm just warning you, because the Bible is warning you, to make sure the substance inside matches the name or reputation outside when you're looking for a good church home.

So, what can we learn from the hollow bunny church? Well, let's ask our first question, what does this letter teach us about Jesus? How does He introduce Himself? In verse 7 Jesus says He [“has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars.”](#) But what does that mean?

Well, remember, everything Jesus is telling the churches about Himself is a repetition of something He revealed to John in Chapter One - and there we saw Jesus walking among seven lampstands and holding seven stars in His hand. He told John the seven lampstands represented the seven churches He's writing to - remember the Bible says that we, as Christians, are the light of the world. And then He said that the seven stars were the seven angels of the seven churches, which we said is often interpreted as the pastors of the churches - the word in the original Greek is actually messenger.

So, the seven stars are the seven messengers of the churches, and Jesus says He has them, they're His. He also has 'the seven Spirits of God' which is actually just a way to say the fullness of the Spirit of God.

Throughout the Bible the number seven is used to symbolize perfection or completeness, going all the way back to the fact that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh so we have a seven day week. When Peter wanted to impress Jesus with his understanding of forgiveness, he asked 'should I forgive someone seven times?' And how did Jesus respond? "No, seventy times seven." The seven spirits of God does not mean anything literal, it's just a picture of the completeness, the fullness, of the Holy Spirit.

So, what were the Christians in Sardis supposed to make of all this? Jesus was telling them that He has the true source of power (the seven Spirits of God) and holds in His hand those who receive it (the seven stars). If the things that were going on in Sardis, the things that gave them their name, were really works of God, He would know about it. He would know if the Spirit of God had really been at work in their church.

It reminds me of the account in the gospels where Jesus is walking through a crowd and people are pressing against Him from every direction. There was a woman in the crowd who had a medical issue that no one could cure. She heard that Jesus had the power to heal people, but she was embarrassed and didn't want to talk to Him directly, but she figured if she could just touch the hem of his robe as He walked past, maybe it would be enough and God would heal her. So, she reaches out, makes contact, but only with His robe, and suddenly Jesus stops in the middle of the crowd, and says, "Who touched me?"

Now, last Sunday was the Super Bowl and you saw the way people surrounded the players after the game - everyone wants to snap a picture, ask a question, give a high-five or a hug - it was like that for Jesus, and the disciples are trying to clear a path for Him and He asks, "who touched Me?"

The disciples look at Him like He's crazy - everyone's touching You, they said. But He knew healing power had left Him. It had passed through Him to someone else and finally the woman came and admitted what happened and Jesus blessed her for her faith.

So now Jesus is telling the church in Sardis - if that kind of power was going from Me to you, I would know. And it isn't - you have a name, people might think God is really at work in your midst, but you're dead - you might be fooling others, but you're not fooling Me. I have the seven spirits of God and the seven stars, and I know what's really going on.

The same is true in our lives – God knows whether you’re walking in the flesh or in the Spirit. He knows whether He’s at work in you or not. He wants to be – He wants to be leading and loving you, He wants to building up your name, but we’re so foolish we often sever that connection, and find ourselves in a place like the church of Sardis – having a reputation for one thing, but really, we’re just coasting on past momentum, and we’re dying on the inside. We’re the chocolate bunny.

So let’s pay close attention to what Jesus has to say to this church.

Jesus tells them, “I know your works, I see them, I know about them. But what I think about them isn’t the same as what others think.” They were involved in some churchy things. But, He says: “[your works are not perfect before God.](#)” Now, that’s probably a bad translation because if we had to be perfect before God, a lot of us would just give up immediately and walk away - we know there’s no way we could do that. We come to God for forgiveness and help because we know we’re not perfect. So, you might be glad to know that more often this word is translated as ‘to make full, to fill up, to cause to abound.’ Other versions say:

- I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. (ESV)
- I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. (NIV)
- I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God. (NLT)

The idea here is that God has something for them to be doing, but they’re not finishing it, they’re not fulfilling it – there’s more work to do, but they’re quitting early, settling for ‘eh, that’s good enough.’ And God says no, it isn’t.

Now this is important for us to grasp because we usually focus on what we receive from God, but the truth is Christ is also looking for something from us - like parents look to children, watching to see - what will you do with what I give you? Will you take good care of it, develop it, or let it deteriorate?

Jesus gives us new life when we come to Him, but then He wants to fill that life with good works – at home, at school, at work – everywhere you go and in everything you do – He wants to use you for His glory and He has promised that if you’re faithful with little, you will be trusted with much. In other words, if you’re really strong and healthy spiritually, if you’re the opposite of Sardis, it’s because you’ve been saying yes to God over and over in your life.

I want you to feel the hope of this – not the despair of feeling that God won’t accept your works unless they’re perfect – I want you to feel the hope of knowing there IS something for you to do in this life, it does matter what choices you make. You DO have purpose and meaning here.

[Eph 2: 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.](#)

I know a lot of you are very busy – it was a challenge for some of you just to get here this morning, and I'm glad you did. But I have to ask – all that stuff you're working so hard on, are you sure it's the good works that God prepared *for you*? Are they the things that God has prepared *you for*? That He has gifted you for? Are you spending yourself in the right ways?

You might have a reputation, just like the church in Sardis, people might think a lot of you and all that you're getting done – it might look great from the outside – but how are you doing within? Are you dying on the inside? Are you spending the few years you have on this earth exhausting yourself, giving your best days or best hours to things that aren't what you were made for?

Turn with me over to John Chapter 15 and I want you notice what true productivity looks like:

1 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

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. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned. 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. 8 By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

If you want to your works, your life, to be found perfect, complete, here is the answer – remain in Christ. Like a branch connected to the vine – let Him have His way in you, let Him flow through you, invite the Holy Spirit to have His way in your life, ask for His guidance and strength – lay everything you have at His feet and let God naturally produce fruit through you. Real fruit. Not just the reputation of having fruit, but real, tangible, taste-able fruit.

Jesus told the church in Sardis He had the Spirit of God and He knew the Spirit *wasn't* flowing. He told His disciples in the crowd that He knew the Spirit *had* flowed to the woman in need of healing. Abide in Christ, let the Spirit flow from Him through you, and let Him lead you in the works you were appointed for and you will fulfill them. Your works will be perfect, complete, because your efforts, your calendar, your expenses, your decisions, will be driven by Christ.

Flip with me back to Revelation 3 and notice that Jesus gives them some immediate action items for getting back on track.

While you're turning there, let me point something else out: in each of the letters to the churches, Jesus has a word of encouragement for those who were trying their best to keep following Him. He lets them know He's aware of them, they hadn't escaped His notice, and He says, "don't worry about what I'm saying to everyone else – you keep the faith." He told a small group in Sardis, **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.** God always has His eye on the faithful, and, I would add, He often wants to use them and their example for those who need to grow. Christian, if you've been faithful, keep doing what you're doing, stand fast, even if you feel like you're the only one who's still doing it. Jesus sees and He knows, you're going to walk with Him so don't grow weary in doing good.

And if you're not that guy, or that gal, if you're the weak one who needs to be strengthened, look around for the people who are growing, the people who are solid, the people who seem to have a real relationship with Christ - they stand out, even in the church - and see what you can learn from them.

Now, what are the action steps Jesus gives the church in Sardis? We find them in verses 2 and 3:

2 Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain

3 Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent.

This is similar to what He told the church in Ephesus, isn't it? Remember from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works. Christians in both churches had started off on the right track but they drifted over time. That should serve as a VERY sober warning to all of us. And it's why we need to abide, or remain in Christ – connected firmly to the source of spiritual life and strength.

If you're a grammar nut, you might want to know that the word 'remember' here is in the present imperative, that means it's a command for you to do right now and keep on doing - keep these things – the things you first heard about Christ, and forgiveness, and new life at the front of your mind. Don't lose sight of them.

How do you do that? By pursuing what have traditionally been called the spiritual disciplines. Things we train ourselves to do for the sake of growth. Things like reading the Bible, memorizing Scripture, praying, fasting, joining in corporate worship. Jesus promises the things you need to nourish your soul are found in His Word, in the Holy Spirit who indwells you as a Christian, and in the fellowship that comes from being in a healthy church. And we, individually, have an obligation to cultivate these things.

If you want to have a spiritually perfect, or complete life, the kind of life that Jesus will commend, you must remain connected to Christ because the works He wants to see in us, and in our churches, happen when the Spirit flows through us and we produce fruit.

He's standing there in front of Sardis with the seven Spirits and the seven stars and it's like He's holding two ends of an extension cord that have become disconnected. He's telling us,

making it very clear, if you want the power to do the works, here it is, come and get it – re-establish the connection with Me. Jesus has the answer for the problem of your withered soul.

And if we will receive all of this, and hold fast to it, He has a promise for us.

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.

Now notice, the white garments are promised to him *who overcomes*. That's a repeated refrain in the letters – to him who overcomes. Christian, there is an aspect of resistance here; we're fighting against the opposition – the enemy without and the flesh within, and we need to realize that, like a true resistance force, we live in enemy territory. This world is not our home and it easy to get caught up in it's works, to give all our time and attention to the things it values and subtly drift away from God.

But if you will wake up, and stay connected, Jesus will confess you before His Father and the angels. He said in the gospels,

Luke 12:8 "...whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God. 9 But he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.

So what does your life look like today? Are you connected to Christ? Are you abiding in Him? Do you have a reputation for good works? And if so, is it real, or are you the hollow bunny – looking good from the outside, but empty on the inside?

Here's the problem – only you and Jesus know. You can keep secrets from the people closest too you, you can hide your indulgences, your sin, your addictions and your habit – all the stuff that is disconnecting you from Jesus – you can hide it from everyone for a while. You can be active in Sunday School, or worship, you can be busy about doing good works – but if they're not a result of being connected to Jesus, if they're not a result of the Holy Spirit flowing through your life, you're dead. And if you don't repent, confess your sin to Him, and strengthen what remains, Jesus says, *I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you*. You don't want to be caught like that. You love God, you've just drifted, and you know it – the connection isn't what it used to be. So what should you do? Remember the first things you heard about the gospel, go back to the essentials of the faith, and find life, forgiveness and strength.

And if you're here this morning and you've never received that first connection to Christ, you need to. And maybe, by being here this morning you've gotten a leg up on others as you see the need to make sure you make and protect that connection over time. Without it, there's no way your works, your life, will ever be judged complete, or perfect, by God. There's just no way, no matter how 'good' you think you are, no matter how much of a

name you might think you have, if those works aren't the result of God at work in your life, they don't matter on judgment day.

So repent, tell God you're sorry for doing things your way, and ask Him to forgive you, to direct your life toward the works He wants you to be doing, and beg Him for the strength to do them – beg Him to make that connection in your life so that the power of the Holy Spirit is flowing in you. He'll hear you, He'll answer, and you'll see the difference as you overcome and then one day, you'll walk with Him in eternity dressed in white and your name will be written in the Lamb's book of life.