

# Christ's Last Word to His Church SERIES: Sardis: Where the Great Physician Felt their Pulse and Declared Them Dead Revelation 3:1-6

This morning Revelation 3 begins with the second shortest letter<sup>1</sup> of Christ's Seven, written to Sardis, hometown of Aesop's Fables and Midas' Touch.

When we read these words we are not only hearing the report Jesus Christ gives after visiting the fifth of the seven churches, we also get the worst reported condition of any of the seven churches. The other churches were either given a perfect bill of health, or had some struggles with compromise, sin, and disobedience. But Sardis is different. Here:

## **The Great Physician Felt their Pulse & Declared Them Dead**

The condition of Christ's Church at Sardis was critical. Jesus, the Great Physician, slipped into this church, knelt down and felt their pulse. Then, after He looked for vital signs, He notes in His report that this church is dead: ***it is no longer alive as a functioning body.***

In just two generations since Pentecost: the Gospel across the world, this church was founded, flourished, and now has died. As we listen to Christ's words in Revelation 3:1-6, remember that the first rule of proper Biblical study and interpretation is to heed the context of any verse.

What is the context here? Jesus is reporting to John on Patmos the results of His tour of the churches. Jesus asks (actually commands in the imperative mode), for John to write these words down for Him. Jesus wants each church as well as all the churches to know what He found and what He expects. What did Jesus find in Sardis?

## **From Alive in Christ To Dead as His Church**

Christ's report contains a tragic finding: the Body of Christ, the Church at Sardis, appeared dead at the moment. They no longer looked alive in Christ, their minds no longer fixed on Christ. They were walking corpses: acting, thinking, and responding just like all those who were dead in trespasses and sin around them.

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<sup>1</sup> Number of words in each letter: Ephesus (192); Smyrna (137); Pergamos (203); Thyatira (294); Sardis (185); Philadelphia (249); Laodicea (235).

Jesus demands that these “church-attenders” repent of just going through the motions of acting like Christians, and get His power at work within them. Sardis had a big name but no life; they were dead as last week’s cut flowers, cold and lifeless.

As we stand for the reading of Christ’s letter to them—we all need to listen and hear with our hearts what Christ said:

*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."*

## Pray

The saints at Sardis had gone ‘from holiness to phoniness’; they had “a name” as Jesus said, but it was only talk, there was no life that backed up the claim.

Jesus spent most of His public ministry bumping up against lifeless religion. Jesus warned those closest to the things of God (the Temple serving priests and Bible teaching Pharisees) that they were going to be cast out into outer darkness.

Note that Christ reports in v. 4 that there are a “few” that are still alive as His born-again children, but they are living in a morgue. Like an old campfire that is cold and gray, when Jesus stirred around in the ashes He found a few that still glowed with life; but the rest were dead, cold, and lifeless.

There are two lines of interpretation that have been taught from this passage. The first is represented by the MacArthur Study Bible, and others who say the church at Sardis was filled with lost, un-regenerated, unsaved people; and Christ is addressing the few believers in their midst<sup>2</sup>.

The other view is clearly expressed by the editors of the ESV study Bible who say that the church was filled with real but sick believers in a coma, near death, but capable of hearing and responding to Christ's call<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> MacArthur Study Bible, in loc.: “The church in Sardis was dead; that is, basically populated by unredeemed, unregenerate people.”

<sup>3</sup> ESV Study Bible, in loc.: “The church in Sardis is in a deep spiritual coma, approaching death but not beyond Christ's summons to wake up, to strengthen what is about to die, to remember and keep the message of grace that the church had received and heard, and to pursue the holiness that flows from grace.”

Actually, both interpretations are reflected in this passage. When believers sin they act like unsaved people; and do get so weak and sick they are in a coma. But as Jesus said, only His sheep can hear His voice and follow Him. So, Jesus was saying to anyone who would and could hear: follow Me and turn from your sin. But, the few were the believers, and the many were either lost, or so steeped in their sins they acted lost, and looked dead. The sobering lesson from Christ is to beware of:

## **The Pathway that Leads to Death: Only Professing Jesus, Not Possessing Him**

What would lead a church to be declared “dead” by Christ? How did they get so far from Him, His life that is abundant, and His Spirit that is to overflow our lives? The answers to those questions are perhaps some of the most sobering lessons we will come to in our walk through these seven churches.

God wants us to know the difference between appearance and reality! In every generation He has had to pronounce against certain ones: “This people *draw near Me with their mouth*, and with their lips do honor Me, but have removed their heart far from Me” (Isaiah 29:13).

That pronouncement came from Christ to His own generation as He ministered. As we open to Matthew 5, we start the longest recorded messages Jesus ever gave (known as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7) is filled with four different warnings about the dangers of false professions. These three chapters end with the four most chilling words any religious person ever could hear: **“I never knew you”**.

## **MEET THE REAL JESUS**

v. 1b `These things **says He who has** the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars:

The Lord Jesus Christ is:

- *Jesus Is All Knowing*: Jesus spoke from the vantage point that He alone sees our hearts, and knows our motives.
- *Jesus Is All Powerful*: Jesus spoke as the only One who holds both their message, and their existence.
- *Jesus Is Always Present*: Jesus spoke as the very One who stands by their candle, walking around at every gathering of His Body the Church.

Jesus spared no words to convey His utter contempt for religious charlatans with the false fruits of self-righteousness. He gave the greatest warnings to those who only appeared to be righteous. Perhaps the strongest warnings ever uttered, came from our loving Savior whenever He came across phonies. Some of His most graphic illustrations were about

these Christian look-a-likes. Here are Christ's seven most well known warnings. Starting in Matthew 7 note that Jesus warned:

## **Beware of Ever Being Like This**

1. ***A Ravenous Wolf Dressed in Sheep's Clothing:*** Matthew 7:15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.
2. ***A Fruitless Tree, Waiting to be Cut Down and Burned in the Fire:*** Matthew 7:19 "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.
3. ***A Shocked Church Worker, Who Never Really Knew Jesus:*** Matthew 7:21-23 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. 22 "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' 23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'
4. ***A House Built on Sand, Only to be Swept Away to Destruction:*** Matthew 7:26 "But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: 27 "and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall."
5. ***A Weed Gathered From Grain Fields, Only to be Cast into Bonfires:*** Matthew 13:30 'Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."
6. ***An Outwardly Fancy Cup, But Fouled with Filth on the Inside:*** Matthew 23:25-26 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. 26 "Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.
7. ***Whitewashed on the Outside, but Still a Tomb Full of Rotting Corpses:*** Matthew 23:27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.

Professing the truth without possessing Him is what Christ was warning us about. What will be the end of all who profess Christ, but don't possess Him personally? Back in Matthew 3 we see these words:

Matthew 3:12 "His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

## **SOME HORRIBLE BIOGRAPHIES**

Other Scripture writers record horror stories, of false believers who are really: dogs, pigs, wolves, thistles, fire, rotten fruit; and all destined for destruction. These are the spiritual phonies that live across the pages of Scriptures:

1. THOSE LIKE CAIN (Genesis 3-4): who grow up nearly in Paradise, hearing from faithful parents about knowing the true God but depart and never look back at Him.
2. THOSE LIKE ESAU (Genesis 25-33): who will sell an eternally valuable spiritual inheritance for a moment of fleshly desire--and find no place of repentance and miss the heavenly city.
3. THOSE LIKE BALAAM (Numbers 25-27): who want to die the death of the righteous, but lived the life of rebellious and went to hell.
4. THOSE LIKE THE PHARISEES (Matthew 23): who lived hygienically sterile exterior holiness and are rotting with corrupted hearts inside and faced damnation.
5. THOSE LIKE JUDAS (John 13:18-30): who lived around Jesus for years, heard and saw Him daily but inside only grew colder and harder by the year!
6. THOSE LIKE MODERN LIBERAL CHURCHES: where the gospel is in a coffin for so many dead, liberal, cold and lifeless churches today. These churches have a name, like the first church, or the reorganized church, or the saint someone's church, they have gorgeous facilities; but as the Great Physician kneels to feel their pulse, He pronounces them dead.

But, when Christ visits here, at His Church that meets here, could there be any of those phonies here at Calvary Bible Church?

Is it possible amongst us, in this great host at CBC, that your heart is filled with coldness, darkness and emptiness?

In Luke 6:46 Jesus asks a vital question:

Luke 6:46 (NKJV) "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?"

## Why Call Me Lord And Obey Me Not?

These words form the basis for an engraving from the Middle Ages, present today in the Lutheran cathedral of Lubeck, Germany. The poem is entitled: "The Lament of Jesus Christ Against the Ungrateful World," which beautifully reflect our Lord's teaching in Luke 6:46 about people who said Lord, but didn't do what Jesus asked them to do:

Thus speaketh Christ our Lord to us,  
You call Me master and **obey Me not**,  
You call Me light and **see Me not**,  
You call Me the way and **walk Me not**,  
You call Me life and **live Me not**,  
You call Me wise and **follow Me not**,  
You call Me fair and **love Me not**,  
You call Me rich and **ask Me not**,  
You call Me eternal and **seek Me not**,  
**If I condemn thee, blame Me not.**

## CONCLUSION: BE SURE YOU KNOW HIM

God wants us to know the difference between appearance and reality! In every generation He has had to pronounce against certain ones: "This people *draw near Me with their mouth*, and with their lips do honor Me, but have removed their heart far from Me" (Isaiah 29:13).

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