

**Pastor Tom Mortenson**

**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**March 19, 2023**

**Sardis: Reviving A Dead Church**

**Revelation 3:1-6**

**Prayer:** *Father, I just want to thank you for your grace; we thank you for your goodness. We thank you for all that you've given to us and the many, many blessings that you have; and again, part of that blessing is just the presence of your Holy Spirit and your word, and that's the part of the gift that we get to unpack this morning. And so I pray we would have the presence of your Holy Spirit, that you would guide us and direct us and that you'd make this of permanent value. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we've been spending the last few weeks examining Jesus' letter to the angels who are in charge of the seven churches. And so far we've seen churches that are faithful but cold like Ephesus, we've seen some that are just bedraggled like Smyrna. There are others that are struggling with false teaching like Pergamum and Thyatira. This morning we're going to be looking at a whole new category of church. This one was referred to by Jesus as dead.

*Revelation 3 says this: "And to the angel of the church in Sardis*

*write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. "'I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.'"*

Well, Jesus describes the church of Sardis not just as a dead church, I mean, we've all seen dead churches, I mean, right here in Port we have quite a few that years ago were thriving and now are just sitting empty with nothing to show but empty parking lots and "for sale" signs. Jesus is not addressing that dead kind of church at all. Actually it's something that's far, far worse. Jesus says: *"'I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.'"*

Jesus is pointing out there's two different sets of eyes on this church just as there are two different sets of eyes on every church. There's the world and its view, and there's the kingdom and Christ's view. According to the world this church is doing just fine, you have the reputation of being alive. According to Jesus their reputation just doesn't line up with reality. And personally, I find these kinds of statements frightening, I mean, they're frightening because I can look at our church and say the exact same thing. We certainly have the reputation of being alive, I mean, we've been around for 30 years, our budget has grown, the building that we're in has grown progressively more and more sound

with all kinds of physical improvements. Is that what makes a church alive?

I once had a conversation with a young man, at one point I asked him, I said, "Do you go to church?" He said, "Yes, I go to a great church." I said to him, "Well, I'm curious. What in your view makes a church great?" And he said without any hesitation whatsoever, he said, "Oh, it's the coffee." Coffee. I said, "The coffee?" He said, "Yeah. We got a machine that has like five or six different kinds of coffee; you just stick a different thing in and different kinds of coffee come out." That was quite a few years ago and I guess he was referring to one of these Keurig coffee makers. Our church recently got one as a gift, so I guess we too can say we are a great church at least according to his standards.

But how do you tell? How do you tell whether a church is good or bad or for that matter whether it's alive or dead? When you drive around town and you look at all these different church buildings it's easy to conclude on one level that this or that church is still alive if it's got cars in the parking lot on a Sunday morning. At least it's operational. But that's not what Jesus sees at all. According to Jesus there are plenty of dead churches that have thriving, growing building programs, full parking lots

and all kinds of activities as well, and Sardis was one of them. And what's frightening about Sardis is the fact that Jesus is the one who tells them that appearances notwithstanding, they are a dead church.

Well, it's one thing to be dying and know that you're sick, it's another thing entirely to be not just dying but dead and not even know it. And so how do I know that Jesus wouldn't say the very same thing to us? I mean if it's not the buildings or the programs or the activities, what is it that marks the difference between a live church and a dead church? I mean what is it that Jesus himself wants to find in a healthy church? Ask a dozen different Christians what makes a healthy church, you're probably going to get a dozen different answers. And when we first started we concluded that the scripture was the only safe place to look for a definition of what a healthy church would be. And the definition that we found was not really a definition, it was just a description about how the very first church operated. It's in *Acts 2:42*, and it says: *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

And so that bear bones skeleton of biblical teaching, of community, of communion and prayer, defined for us what God says a healthy

church should look like. And so we as a church sought to build on that by looking to others for guidance as to how to flesh that out. And the best example we can come up with is through an organization that's known as 9 Marks. And this is by no means a final say but they issued a guideline in an article entitled "What Should I Look For In A Church?" And they list the following nine qualifications that they suggest mark out a healthy church. I've included the biblical references so you can see where they get each point from. So this is kind of a test for all of us, us included. These are the nine marks of a healthy church.

Number one is expositional preaching. They ask: Does the pastor preach God's Word, or his own ideas? Does he allow Scripture to set his preaching agenda, or does he pick topics by some other criteria? (2 Tim. 2:15, 4:2-2)

Second is biblical theology. Does the church openly confess key biblical doctrines? Do the leaders consistently teach sound doctrine? (Tit. 1:9-11)

Third is a biblical understanding of the gospel. Does the church clearly proclaim the good news about what Jesus Christ accomplished for sinners in his death and resurrection consistently? (1 Cor. 15:1-4)

Fourth is a biblical understanding of conversion. Does the church teach that people must be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:1-8)? Does the church teach that in order to become a Christian, a person must repent of sin and trust in Christ, both of which are ultimately gifts of God? (Acts 11:18, 20:21)

Fifth is a biblical understanding of evangelism. Does the church preach the gospel to non-Christians and encourage its members to do the same? Does it understand that it's our responsibility to preach the message of salvation, yet God is the only one who can do the saving? (Matt. 28:18-20; Eph. 2:1-10)

Sixth is biblical church membership. Does the church take membership seriously by seeking to ensure that its members faithfully attend? Does it encourage members to fulfill the biblical "one-anothers" with each other? (Heb. 10:24-25; Eph. 4:11-29)

Seven is biblical church discipline. Does the church lovingly, patiently practice church discipline? (Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13)

Eight is biblical discipleship and growth. Does the church expect and equip its members to grow spiritually (2 Pet. 1:3-11)? Does

the church encourage its members to disciple one another (Rom. 15:14)? Growing as a Christian should be normal, not exceptional.

And finally, biblical church leadership. Is the church led by godly, qualified men? Does the church look to Scripture to determine its leadership structure? (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-11)

That's a lot of stuff, I recognize that, but it's good to have a list such as this because it kind of points out our church's strengths and weaknesses. There's some of these things that I think we do well; some of these things we definitely need to work on. Amazingly it's the very same attitude that Jesus had towards this dead church, this church of Sardis. And as far as Jesus was concerned even a dead church is not beyond hope. This is what he says to the church at Sardis. He says: *Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.*

So Jesus issues five different commands that he says is going to bring life back to a dead church. He says, number one, wake up, then he says strengthen what remains, then he says remember what you received and heard, keep it and repent. So I want to look at those five this morning.

First Jesus says wake up. Well, he's not just referring to sleep, he's referring as well to death because in scripture sleep and death are closely linked. You know after Lazarus died Jesus told his disciples in *John 11*, he says: *"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him."* The disciples said to him, *"Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."* Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, *"Lazarus has died."*

And Paul says in *Ephesians 5:14*, he says: *"Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."* So what scripture is saying, what Jesus is referring to is to be asleep in this sense is to be just like a dead man, it is to be stupefied, which is exactly where the enemy wants us.

You know, just last week we spoke about the church in Thyatira and how this Jezebel was able to bring sexual compromise to ancient Israel and how modern day Jezebels work today. We saw the key word, the key way they do it is through incrementalism. You know, Sardis didn't decide one day that it's just going to become a dead church. Instead over many, many, many days she made lots of little decisions that brought her to the place so slowly and imperceptibly that she was literally lulled into the sleep of death. And Jesus says, wake up! It's like somebody violently shaking somebody who's



sleeping while shouting, "Snap out of it!" And it may have taken months or even years and these tiny little backward steps for someone or something to wind up dead like the church of Sardis was. But you know God describes the attitude that he wants us to take in order to counter that process. He says in *1 Peter*: *Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.* Sardis had done just the opposite. Instead of being sober-minded, instead of being watchful, their leaders had fallen asleep on the job; they basically opened the flock up to lions and wolves. But Jesus is incredibly gracious. He tells them right off the bat, he says, "You are dead," but then he gives them instructions on how to come back to life. But here's the critical part. You see, the most important part of clamoring back to life is first recognizing that you're dead. The only way you can possibly wake up is if you're willing to admit you're asleep, and that means as leaders being willing to ask yourself hard questions.

Do I ever wonder if I'm genuinely and honestly saved? To be completely honest, I do. My confidence is in Christ alone but Christ himself famously said: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out*

*demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'*

These pseudo believers were shocked, they were astounded, they were so convinced they were safe and secure that they never even questioned their salvation. Christ said they were dead and they never even knew it. I mean they were sleeping but nobody ever woke them up. So you can ask, well, were they saved at one time and then they lost their salvation, I mean, what about once saved, always saved? Isn't that a fundamental part of the evangelical faith? We certainly believe what Jesus clearly expressed and that is that our salvation is a gift of God and God loses none of those whom the Father has gifted to the Son.

Jesus said in *John 6: All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.*

So we don't believe that anyone who's truly saved can lose his salvation because Christ alone does the saving and therefore Christ

loses no one. And because we can't save ourselves, we cannot unsave ourselves as well. But folks make a mess out of the idea when they suggest that all that means is that you have to raise your hand at a meeting, go forward at a gospel meeting and you're signed, sealed and delivered for the rest of your life no matter how wickedly or miserably you live it. That completely misunderstands what being born again is.

When you have a saving encounter with the living God, you undergo a heart transplant and that heart of stone within you is removed to be replaced by a heart of flesh that seeks to obey God and do his will. That's a far cry from making a simple profession of faith. And Jesus has no problem calling out people falsely believing they were saved when they were not. Peter tells us to make certain that you get this right. This is what he says, he says, make sure you're not kidding yourself. He says: *Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election.* Paul says don't just assume because you had a religious experience that you're automatically a born again believer in Christ. He pleads with us to be soberly examining our lives. In *2 Corinthians 13* he says: *Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? -- unless indeed you fail to meet the test!*

See, the church at Sardis, they were unwilling to examine themselves to see if they were asleep at the wheel, and so God in his mercy has grabbed them by the shoulders and he's shaking them and he warns them, and he says: *If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.*

Well the second commandment Jesus gives to Sardis is to strengthen the things that remain. Okay. Well, how do you know what those things are? How do you know what things to strengthen? I think it was Carl F. Henry who once stated this truism, he said: "All institutions, all Christian institutions tend toward apostasy." Just like entropy is that force in physics that causes all ordered things to tend towards disorder, so too there's this entropy-type law that applies to churches. A biblically-ordained, God-honoring church will always understand the necessity of first and foremost having a love for God and love for its brethren, also find repentance and holiness and compassion for the lost and discipleship and evangelism. But these things, they tend to go by the wayside when the church starts to lose its focus. These are the things that God said the church at Sardis needed to strengthen because apparently all was not lost, I mean, there was still some remnants of what the church was supposed to be that remained, and God commanded the church to identify those things and to work

specifically to strengthen them.

Well, part of the process was command number three, which is:

Remember what you received and heard. And again, the easiest way to understand this command is to recognize what happens when we do the opposite, when we forget the very reason why we came together in the first place. Jesus told the church at Ephesus they had lost their first love. That's the danger for every single church. You simply forget what brought you together in the first place.

Command number four is simply put, it's -- quote -- "keep it," you know, strengthen, remember and keep. All of these commands are designed to recapture territory that's been lost. You have to understand again my constant reference to the fact that we are at war. I said there's only two kingdoms: The kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness and only one of those kingdoms is going to prevail. So nothing about this life is neutral.

And you have to understand, there's a constant energy pulling us away from Christ and his kingdom. You know, when Paul addressed the Galatian church that was sliding into legalism, he said: *O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?* I can tell you who. I can tell you it's not rocket science either. It's the same one who brought the church of Sardis to the brink of death itself and he

never rests and he never takes a vacation. Jesus is basically giving us a number of variations on the very same theme.

Daniel Akin in his commentary on Revelation stated why a command to keep it is so critical when the church is under constant pressure to drift. This is what he said: "The fact is, we never drift toward anything worthwhile. Never. We never slide into truth, but we can slide into error. You slide and slip into theological liberalism. You slide and slip into moral compromise. No, we never drift anywhere worth going. Furthermore, you do not want to drift and add to the gospel. And you don't want to slip and subtract from the gospel. Stay where you are. Keep it. Hold on. Guard it. Never let it go. Stay with what you received and heard when you put your faith in Jesus." (Exalting Jesus in Revelation (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (p. 108). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.)

You see, when the lose something incrementally you oftentimes have to go back the exact same way capturing and recapturing territory incrementally that you didn't realize you had lost.

And finally, we have the fifth command of Jesus says to the church of Sardis. It's a simple one-word command. He says, "Repent." You know lots of folks think that Peter's command in the book of

Acts to repent, to be saved is kind of like a one-shot deal, that repentance is to change your mind, to change your attitude, do about-face when it comes to sin. We know that's what repentance is. That's certainly true about coming to Christ, but it should be true on an almost daily basis as we discover new layers of sin requiring new levels of repentance every single day.

You know, one of the most astounding things to learn as a Christian is that this process of sanctification, this process that's seeking to shape and mold us into the very image of Christ is an ongoing process that starts the moment we're saved and it never stops; it keeps going until we die.

I've often said that the Christian life is like peeling an onion. You know how easy it is to peel that dirty outside layer and find this fresh new shiny layer right then and there. You throw that onion back into the bin and pretty soon you find that shiny layer that has gotten dinged and dented and dirty again. And so repentance is the process of finding that shiny new layer over and over again. That means forsaking sin and turning around and moving in the opposite direction.

You know, God knows every single sin you and I will ever commit. He's already seen it. He saw them clearly from before the day we

were born and yet somehow, some way he still has chosen to fix his love on us.

And one of the most remarkable things about repentance is the realization that of all these things we repent of, they were never a surprise to God. I often say God never hits his forehead, he never goes, "Oh, man, look at that." Never. God saw you and me in all of our wickedness before we were ever born and yet he still loves us enough to go layer by layer after the onion of our sin life. And we peel one layer of sin off and we feel all shiny and new and that's a good thing, but God looks at that onion and he knows there's layer upon layer upon layer of sin yet to be uncovered, much of which we may not even have begun to realize as sin.

It's stunning to think that God has seen us in all of our wickedness from birth to death and he still is loving us, still working on our lives. I mean just think of the sins that were major in your life when you first came to Christ. Now think of those sins that are major today and my guess is they are different. I think back to the sins that I had to deal with when I first came to Christ for repentance and those sins were sex, drugs and rock and roll and all of those things that mattered fifty years ago to somebody in their twenties. The sins that I deal with now are more



like pride and arrogance and laziness and indifference. Those are very different sins, and a lot of them are a lot more socially acceptable. So if you would ask me as a twenty-year-old which sins were more pernicious, which ones were more dangerous, I would have instantly said, "Oh, the first set." I'm not minimizing them but there are far more insidious sins that God is determined to root out of his sheep. And they're the kind of sins that can permeate a church like Sardis, giving them the appearance of life when they're actually quite dead.

God is undertaking a project in every single one of his sheep that's designed to transform them constantly -- not occasionally, but constantly into the image of his Son. These five commands from Jesus can transform a dead church into an alive and thriving one. Again, this is what he says. He says: *Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.*

Wake up, strengthen, remember, keep it, and repent. And Jesus goes on to give a warning and a commendation of those few who remain faithful even as the church has not. This is what he says, he says: *If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have*

*still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.*

Well the beauty of this is that Jesus knows it all. He knows who's been faithful, he knows who has not, he knows those who are walking with a garment that's still white, still unsullied by the evil that surrounds them. And he says: *'The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'*

So here's Jesus and he says to those who are faithful who still conquered despite the failures in the church that he will never blot their name out from the book of life. And in the background little flags go up and we start to say, well, does that mean if you fail that you will be blotted out from the book of life? Meaning that you were there at one point and now you're not there because you got blotted out? Doesn't that mean that we can lose our salvation?

Well, notice what Jesus is actually saying here. He's saying he will never blot out those who conquer. He says: *The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never*

*blot his name out of the book of life.* And those who conquer are those whose names are already written in the book of life.

John Piper points out that there are two other places in Revelation that refer to a blotting out of a name from the book of life, and both refer to it as an impossibility for those who have been chosen by God and gifted to his Son. One is all about the beast that the entire world is going to wind up worshiping and that world consists of those whose names are not in the Lamb's book of life.

This is what it says. This is *Revelation 13*. It says: *And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.*

So God says the whole world's going to go after this beast with one notable exception: Those whose name have been written in the book. We find the same kind of assurance in *Revelation 17*. It says: *The*

*beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.*

So who's marveling to see the beast? Well again, it's the whole world. It's every single person whose name is not in that book who seek to worship the beast. So those who refuse to worship the beast, those are the conquerors and they're conquerors because their names have been written in the book of life from before the foundation of the world.

This is how Piper puts it. He says: "It is not nonsense to state the condition: If you conquer, God will not erase your name, and then to state the assurance, if your name is in the book, you will conquer. That is not a contradiction. God's written-down-ones really must conquer, really will conquer. They must, and they will. One side highlights responsibility, you must. And one side highlights God's sovereignty, you will."

You know a few years back Steve and I went to the T4G conference in Kentucky. It's Together for the Gospel. I was in charge of buying the tickets, and I messed it up big time. I thought I purchased

the entire package but in reality what I only purchased was a meal plan for Steve and myself. So I got the receipt for the meal plan months before the event and I got it, I put it away, I thought it was the whole thing.

Now the way these conferences work, there was 12,000 people at this conference and everybody has to register and they do it by giving your name. And so you give them the name, they look it up and then they give you your credentials and you're able to go into the conference. And so I went directly to the M's and Steve went to the S's. Neither of our names were in the book. I said there's got to be a mistake here, I mean, I showed them the receipt and they pointed out it was for the food service and not the conference. I said do you really think we flew all the way down to Kentucky just to sample your cafeteria food? They didn't budge. And by the time we finally sorted it out that I had purchased a meal plan for both Steve and I not the whole ticket, they were completely filled up and there was no more room, they said we were out of luck.

Well by God's providence my brother-in-law and sister-in-law were actually working at the conference as volunteers. They spoke to their boss and they let us in as volunteers and even gave us t-shirts and tasks to do. So we were very grateful that we weren't

stuck in Kentucky for three days eating our bought-and-paid-for cafeteria food trying to figure out what to do.

But you know, I vividly remember that sinking feeling, there's a whole huge crowd of people and there's these volunteers, they're looking over the list and they're saying repeatedly, "I just don't find your name here." That was just a conference. I mean that was just a matter of days. I mean, how do you think you would feel if it wasn't a conference, if it wasn't just a matter of days, but if it was the difference between eternal life and death? What if it was the difference between heaven and hell? What if it was a matter of eternity?

You see, there is a book that's a lot more real than the book that they had at the conference and every single blood bought believer in Jesus Christ has his name written in that book. Speaking of the heavenly city, this is what God says in *Revelation 21*. He says: *But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.*

Well, what if you were able to find out whether or not your name was written in this book in this lifetime; would it make a difference? I mean is there any such thing as a person desperately

wanting to get into the book but being -- but finding out like I did that your name's not there? Well the answer to both of those questions is no. You see, if you learned in this life that your name wasn't in the book, you know what your reaction would be? Your reaction would be, "Stupid book! What kind of fool wants to be in a stupid book like that?" And the reason I can say this with confidence is because God tells us how people who are not in the book react to the gospel. God says in *1 Corinthians 1:18*: *The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* And in *1 Corinthians 2:14* he says: *But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*

See, folks genuinely hate the doctrine of election. And part of their concern understandably is that only elect, only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life are going to respond to the call of the gospel, and some folks think that's going to diminish our zeal of spreading the gospel but in actuality it has the exact opposite effect. Because I don't know who God has elected and who he hasn't, I'm compelled to share the gospel with everyone and anyone.

It was C. H. Spurgeon I believe who said: "If God would have

painted a yellow stripe on the backs of the elect, I would go around lifting shirts. But since he didn't, I must preach 'whosoever will' and when 'whosoever' believes, I know he is one of the elect."

I mean the beauty of the doctrine of election is it puts us in our proper place when it comes to sharing the gospel. We are merely the messengers. We don't do the saving; God's Holy Spirit does, but he does it through the message he compels us to bring. And that takes all of the pressure off of us to make our friends our relatives and our neighbors into Christians because that's not what we're capable of and that's not our job. It is our job, though, to share the good news. That God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son and he gave him to live out a perfect life and then offer that life up on a cross so that we by faith in his resurrection could claim his righteousness as our own and stand before a holy God clad in his perfection rather than our sin.

The good news is that Jesus Christ can bring back to life even a dead church like Sardis. And if he can do that for a whole church, he can certainly do that for your friends, your relatives, and your neighbors who give all the appearance of being alive, even though they are literally the walking dead.



We are to be the sweet smell of life to those who are entering into spiritual life, but we are also the stench of death to those who are not. Spurgeon said it would certainly be helpful if God painted yellow stripes on the backs of those who respond, on those whose names are already written in the Lamb's book of life, but it's just not the case, therefore our task is just like Spurgeon's, it's to broadcast the gospel wholesale to those with yellow stripes and those who have none. Let's pray.

*Father, I just again, I thank you for the fact that all is not lost, even a church that's referred to as dead can come back to life if they just do what you've given it to do. I pray that we would be able to wake up, we would be able to remember those things that matter, to keep those things that matter, to strengthen those things that matter and to repent of our sin. I pray that for us as a church, I pray that for our friends, our relatives and our neighbors and all those we come in contact with. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*