

Introduction

This week I took the time to survey 25 of America's most popular churches. Their popularity was determined by how many people attend one of their campuses each week. They range in attendance from 16,000 all the way to 43,000 weekly attenders. The results were interesting. They come from various denominational and nondenominational backgrounds. One thing these churches seemed to have in common is they are cool and exciting. They are very busy. There is a lot going on. They all look alive. If I did not look at the fine detail, the outward persona of almost every one of them would excite me and could tempt me to think of how I would like to be a part of something like that.

It is easy to see greener grass in places other than where you are because you know the blemishes where you are. It is also natural to want to be where the grass looks greener. If you were a cow, however, the best looking grass might not be best for you. Astroturf might look greener and more appealing, but it could not do anything for your vitality. In our series on the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor, we turn this morning to a church that had the greener grass look. However, real vitality was almost completely lacking. It is the church in the city of Sardis.

[Read Text and Pray]

The main point of Jesus's letter to the church in Sardis is to let them and all the other churches know that the goal of the church is not to appear to be alive. The goal is neither to be busy nor to be popular in the world. In fact in a roundabout way, Jesus fills us in on just what the main purpose of the church is—what it cannot afford to lose and still be a church that is alive.

I. The Place Called Sardis

Sardis is the name of the Asian city where this church was located.

It was a tired old city, past its prime, living out its days on the strength of its past reputation. People knew Sardis because of what it used to be. Long, long ago Sardis was a wealthy city. At the time of this letter from Jesus, the city was not poor, but was just a glimmer of what it had been in the past.

In the long history of its existence, one especially notable characteristic stands out. It SEEMED impenetrable. That is because it was positioned on a steep, high hill. The sides of the hill ascended almost straight up nearly 1,500 feet. The citizens considered themselves to be indomitable.

Their pride and self-assurance turned out to be their undoing. You probably remember the name Cyrus. He was the king of Persia who permitted the Jews in exile to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. In those days (around 550 BC) the king of Sardis, whose name was Croesus, went to war with Cyrus. It did not go well and Croesus and his army had to retreat back up into the city. The citizens of Sardis were so confident of their security that they left the walls unguarded. A certain Persian soldier, however, found a way up and into the fortress. The Persian army followed. They caught the inhabitants of Sardis completely caught off-guard and took the city. The same kind of thing happened to Sardis and its inhabitants again in 218 B.C. Then in 17 A.D. Sardis was leveled by an earthquake. It was rebuilt, but the people settled out into the surrounding lowlands. William Ramsey wrote the following about Sardis: "It was the city whose name was almost synonymous with pretensions unjustified, promise unfulfilled, appearance without reality, confidence that heralded ruin."

As it was, however, Sardis was known like the other Asian cities for its idolatrous trade guilds and emperor worship. One of its chief trades was the dying of woolen fabric; so it was a place of importance as related to the garment industry. The city also boasted a sizable Jewish population. These aspects figure interestingly into our grasp of Jesus's message to the church in the city. You see, what is striking about Sardis and the church there is that the conditions confronting the church were much the same as the towns we have seen. Like Thyatira, Sardis was known for its trade guilds. Like Smyrna and Pergamum, it was known for the worship of the Emperor. Like Smyrna, Sardis had a large Jewish population. But Jesus's message to the church demonstrates nothing of pressure or persecution. There is nothing of slander as was happening in Smyrna where the so-called synagogue of Satan (the Jewish community) was giving the Christians a bad name. It seems as though Sardis was the city where everybody just got along. There was peace. It was a lot like our post-modern culture of coexistence and tolerance in which everyone is okay so long as they don't make waves and enforce their truth on others. So it has been said that the peace of Sardis was the peace of the cemetery. That the church seems to have faced little or no conflict suggests that the city was happy with this church. The church had learned how not to be offensive.

From the outset, then, we suspect something is wrong. For if we learn anything from the New Testament and from our own personal interaction with non-Christians, we learn that the cross of Jesus is offensive. If we preach the cross of Christ and seek to live for him, there will be a reaction. And it will not be pleasant. The people who identify with Christ as his church should beware if the world loves them. Jesus himself said, "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:19). Jesus is not saying we should try to make the world hate us. He is saying we should make sure we are not of this world but follow him faithfully. And when that happens, the world will not be glad to have you around.

That is why I found it very troubling to read a couple strategy statements from what is identified as America's second most popular church. It is not a health-wealth church and it asserts in their doctrinal statement a belief in the inerrancy of scripture. But this church's stated aim is to "Endear our community by ensuring people know we're here, and happy we're here, and are better off because we're here." Their goal is be celebrated and appreciated by their community. Now, we ought to love the people in our communities. But here is a problem. The problem, according to Jesus, is that they have as a goal something Jesus says cannot happen if they are to be true to him.

Here is a second prong of the strategy. They want to, "Inspire [their] audience by creating experiences that cause people to say: 'I'm glad I came and can't wait to come back.'" They want to attract people with experience. They want to provide experiences that make people want to return for the experience. It would seem that concern for experience has overridden the importance of preaching truth. If you are to connect with people through experience, then you must not offend them with the truth. The only way for an experience-centric approach to continue to draw the world is to hide the message of an inerrant Bible so deeply beneath the experience that people do not see it or adjust it so it is not so offensive.

Now, please do not get me wrong. I want people to be glad we are here. And I want people to want to come back. In fact I have had folks share these very things with me about their experience here at Grace Community Church. But they weren't people of the world. They were people who had been saved out of the world to love and follow Jesus Christ. Jesus did not call the church to entertain the world while it sinks further and further down to judgment and an eternity of divine wrath. The Lord Jesus Christ calls the church to make disciples and thereby to rescue the perishing,

snatching them out of the flames. You do not do that by becoming worldly. When you absorb the world into the church, thinking you reach the world by becoming like it, you actually end up having nothing to offer the world that is any different from what it already has outside the church.

The church exists ultimately as a lampstand to point out to people the fact that everyone of us is a sinner/is a breaker of the law of Holy God, and to point people to Jesus as the exclusive savior. There is salvation in no one else but him. Right standing with God comes alone through his substitutionary death on the cross. And you can have that right standing through faith alone. That faith is a faith that leaves the world behind, denies itself, and follows Christ. And the further one gets down the road of following him the less and less that one looks like the world and the more and more he looks like Jesus and the more the world wants to do to him what it did to Jesus. So beware of popularity in this world. Jesus did not send us to be endeared to the world but so that the world might be saved by stopping being endeared to itself and becoming endeared to Christ.

II. The Problems in Sardis

There are three problematic matters here, but they are all interrelated—their reputation, their works, and their walk.

A. The first matter is their reputation. Jesus tells the Sardis church, “You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” I am going to suggest that the church in Sardis was the church of what’s cool and exciting. It is because of their reputation. One’s reputation is based upon the thoughts and opinions of others. And here in Sardis the reputation of the church was based upon what the city thought of it. And the city thought highly of the church. It was a happening place. They had works. It was an appealing place, for they did not face the opposition other churches in the region faced. The city looked at the church at Sardis and declared it to be alive. This is the people who did not belong to it. THEY are the ones who said the church was alive. Perhaps they even went to some of the services. And even though many would not join, they thought highly of the work it was doing. But this is just the problem as far as Jesus is concerned. One of the tag lines of one of the most popular churches in America goes like this: “Forget everything you ever thought of when it comes to church.” That sounds like Sardis. They were busy and they were popular. None of those negative stereotypes. It was the church that managed not to offend anybody and make friends with everybody.

However, there is one who was quite offended. His name is Jesus. He shows up to Sardis with a coroner’s pronouncement—DEAD. It is not that they sang their songs too slow. It is not that they were all residents at the city nursing home. It is that they caved from where they had begun. Their desire to be liked and not be offensive to the city in which they lived blew their purpose to smithereens. It would seem that the gospel of Jesus Christ was a thing of the past in Sardis. They had gotten beyond the gospel because after all, the gospel is not popular. You might wonder why I think this way. Well, notice what Jesus says to those who overcome. He points out that he will confess before his Father the names of those who overcome. It points us back to a strong warning Jesus had issued to his disciples. Back in Matthew 10, Jesus was warning his disciples not to fear the intimidation of those who would be hostile to them because of their gospel witness. And he said, “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven.” It seems that in Sardis the church had succumbed to the desire to just get along with everybody, to be the church who endeared itself to its community, whose community would be happy they were there, the Jews included. To do this they had to keep topics like sin, wrath, judgment, and the cross of Christ on the

down-low. That is why they had a reputation of being alive, but to the eyes that matter, those of Christ Jesus, they were dead.

The church must never lose sight of our purpose to lift high Jesus Christ and his cross. WE MUST NEVER HIDE FROM the truths of God's holiness, sin's wickedness, God's judgment, and Christ's cross. We must not be belligerent toward the world in which we live. We must not TRY to be offensive with our manner unto the world. But we MUST NOT hide the truth from the world just because we know that the world will not like it.

B. Now, because they were dead, the works of the church in Sardis were unacceptable. Again, there was plenty of activity in Sardis. Jesus says, "I know your works." But he also says, "I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God." I like MacArthur's comments on these works. He writes, "Though sufficient to give the Sardis church a reputation before men, those deeds were insufficient and unacceptable in God's sight. They were but the pointless, lifeless motion of corpses; the Sardis congregation's good works [were] merely [the] grave clothes of the unregenerate. The spiritual zombies populating the Sardis church were living a lie. They had been weighed on the scales by the Righteous Judge and found wanting." (112)

Being a busy church with lots of activity, with lots of community services, with lots of enthusiasm does not constitute a living church any more than a busy person doing works constitutes a saved person. Anyone who is depending on their works to make them right with God is just as lost and headed for hell as an atheist who believes there is no God. Human good works get no one into heaven. Persons are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Only works that proceed from faith are works that please God. They cannot save, but they can please. The fundamentals of the churches that are praised throughout the New Testament are faith, hope, and love. To the Colossians Paul wrote, "We always thank God for you since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven." Works that are pleasing to God proceed from that kind of faith. But without faith it is impossible to please God. There was a lot of work in Sardis but not a lot of true faith.

Do not be deceived into thinking that your works and deeds are proof of life in you. Rather, out of an unashamed faith unequivocally placed in the Lord Jesus Christ, serve the Lord heartily always careful to give Christ the glory.

C. Further, because they were dead, the works of those in Sardis were tainted with sin. Jesus notes that there were only a few in Sardis who had not "soiled their garments." Sin is presented as a stain that ruins one's clothing. It destroys and contaminates. It renders one unacceptable to the Lord. James is helpful here. He speaks of religion that is pure and undefiled before God; it includes good works—visiting orphans and widows in their affliction—but it also involves keeping "oneself unstained from the world." The Sardis church might well have had a great ministry to orphans and widows, but what they had failed to do was keep themselves unstained from the world. Only a few had kept themselves from the sinful and immoral ways of Sardis and the other cities of Asia Minor. A church that hides the gospel in order not to offend will soon let go of biblical ethics as well. And that's what they had done there in Sardis.

The church of Jesus Christ is to be a church that upholds the whole truth, the whole counsel of God. It is to be a church of love and fruitful works of mercy, but it is also to be a church of holiness and godliness of life, walking in a manner worthy of the calling we have received in Christ.

III. The Prescriptions of Jesus

There are actually 5 commands Jesus gives here. Our time is short; so I will have to be brief.

A. First, Jesus commands the congregation to "WAKE UP." Things are in such utter shambles in Sardis, and the people are oblivious to it. It is as though they are asleep. It is so easy to get caught up in the way things are that we just get used to it and content ourselves with it. In essence we go to sleep. All of us need to hear the call of Jesus to wake up, to make sure that we are awake. None of us can afford to go to sleep. We need to be awake and fully engaged as Christ's followers and as Christ's church as to what is going on around us. Sometimes revivals have been called awakenings because people who seemed to be asleep have suddenly awakened to the truth and it has resulted in magnificent turnings back to God. Let us be urging one another to be staying awake. Let us be praying for an awakened church.

B. The second of Jesus' commands is to STRENGTHEN WHAT REMAINS. It seems that Jesus wants those who do wake up to the disaster among them in Sardis not to give up hope but to earnestly engage in equipping one another to stand strong. It happens by teaching, training, and discipling. It is an ongoing task in the church. Relationships in the church are intended for this very purpose. I hope you are involved with others in this church body through small groups and through one-on-one relationships to be strengthening and encouraging one another.

C. The third command from Christ is to REMEMBER. Christ calls them to remember what they had received and heard. He is pointing them back to the gospel. That which now has been eclipsed in Sardis needs to be recovered. It is a danger to forget the past. To want to be modern and current, cool and exciting, to be up with the times must not distract us from the riches of the past. Times change but God's truth does not. God's ethics do not. God's strategies do not. God's purposes do not.

D. Command number four is to KEEP. "Remember what you have received and heard. Keep it." Jesus said, "He who has my commands and KEEPS them, he it is who loves me." We must not only be hearers of the word but also doers. Keeping the word of God means obeying him. Believe the truth and obey the truth. That is the way of a church that is pleasing to the Lord.

E. Command number five is to REPENT. It sums up what Jesus has been saying in these commands. The church needed to do a 180. They needed to turn around because what was going on there in Sardis was completely unacceptable to Christ. In fact he gives a warning that the citizens of Sardis would have understood very well: "I will come like a thief." Remember the history of Sardis, two surprise attacks and one earthquake each of which caught the city completely off guard and brought it down? This is the warning of Jesus. Jesus wants revival in Sardis. It is a sad situation, but there is hope for change if the people will pray, will teach one another, will remember and keep the precious gospel once entrusted to the believers in the town. If they won't repent, however, Jesus is going to come and take them out. Again we see that Jesus is absolutely serious when it comes to his churches being faithful to proclaim him, to be unashamed of the gospel, and to keep fast to it in obedience.

V. The Promises of Jesus

As surely as Christ warns of the dire consequences for a refusal to repent, he offers unsurpassable encouragement to those who do, for those who conquer. Those who conquer are those who refuse to deny the Lord. They refuse to fear man in the place of God. They refuse to elicit acceptance from the culture around them by dulling the sharp edge of the gospel. Rather, they unashamedly hang the gospel light of Jesus on the lampstand of their life. To them Jesus makes four promises.

One. He says, "They will walk with me." Did you ever wish you might have been in the company of those who were on the road to Emmaus with Jesus? How about something even better? How about walking with him in glory? Walk with Jesus! Talk with Jesus! Be in the company of Jesus! This is the hope of those who unashamedly own Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior!

Promise number two. Jesus says, "the one who conquers will be clothed in white garments." Sardis was known for its process of dying fabrics. Living in Sardis, this church had become dyed with the colors of the city. But if you follow Jesus, he will take all those worldly dyes away. His people will walk with him shamelessly in the beauty of holiness.

Promise number three. Jesus will never blot his name out of the book of life. If you belong Jesus Christ, if you persevere in faith in him, you have NOTHING to worry about EVER. He will NEVER blot your name out of the book of life! He who has Christ truly has eternal life.

Promise number four. Jesus says of the one who conquers, "I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels." Those who are unashamed of Christ, Christ Jesus will be unashamed to call them brothers. He will be unashamed to speak their very names and intercede for them before the throne of his Father, and the angels.

Conclusion

The church in Sardis was a church of the cool and exciting. They had obtained the favor of the city and had a reputation that they were alive. They had become a model of an inoffensive Christianity. But having succeeded in attracting the favor of the city, they had relinquished the heart of their very purpose for being a church. They had in fact offended none other than Jesus himself. Because they had denied Christ, Christ was on the verge of denying them. Brothers and sisters, let us not overlook the faithful saying Paul mentions to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:12: "If we deny him, he also will deny us." Let us constantly be alert to the fact that you cannot curry favor with the world and be pleasing to Jesus. Sadly this is the very effort of not a few churches in our day. It is given the common tag of being "seeker-sensitive." But we really have nothing to offer seekers if we are not above-all sensitive to Jesus. The goal here is not for us to go throw rocks at other churches. Let us stay awake and look at ourselves. Let our course as a church be charted well. And let us pray for other churches in our day and in our land that we will all wake up from our slumber and strengthen what remains and stand for Christ Jesus and his glorious gospel.

Prayer

Benediction

Brothers and sisters, be not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. Know that if you are unashamed of him, he will also be unashamed of you before his Father and the angels. A-men.