

Reputation

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Preacher: Luca Sueri

[0:00] Good morning, everyone. Let me add my welcome to Alistair's, and thank you, Adi, for reading and praying for us. I really hope that we're all finding this series of sermons on the letters to the churches in Revelation helpful.

They're certainly challenging passages, but they're also such a great source of encouragement. Isn't it beautiful how Jesus, the Savior of the world himself, he writes these personal messages to his churches.

He spurs them on, he tells them the good things that they're doing for his glory, but he also pleads with them. He pleads with them to repent and to come back to him when that's needed.

And there are some pretty tough words for us in these passages. There are warnings, there are words of condemnation. But even the warnings radiate love.

They're merciful warnings. And I'm stressing this this morning because I imagine you might have gulped like I did when this passage was assigned to me to speak on, when you read, you have a reputation of being alive, but you're dead.

[1:17] So we're looking at the fifth letter this morning, the letter to the church of Sardis. And yes, there is something different about this church.

If we compare this church of Sardis to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira that we've been looking at for the past four weeks, to all of those churches, Jesus gave, Jesus had something good to say to them.

He gave them, he commended them for something. But he doesn't do that for Sardis. The first part of the letter is a strong message of condemnation.

There is nothing that Jesus praises Sardis for. Their own existence as a church is actually threatened by Jesus. The second part, however, it contains a refreshing message of hope.

So this is how we're going to look at this passage today. Verses 1 to 3, we will call them the church who looks the part. And then verses 4 to 6, we'll call the Christians who walk the walk.

[2:22] There's going to be condemnation for the church who looks the part, but there's going to be hope for the Christians who walk the walk. I'll start by talking about sleepwalking, though.

Stay with me. I may sound a bit random. But did you know that there are sleepwalkers who can do much more than just walking in their sleep? There are people who can do the most complex things while they're asleep.

They won't even know that they're doing them, and they won't remember any of it by the morning. Some people eat in their sleep. There are people who apparently actually gain weight while being on a diet and can't figure out why that is.

And it's because they're eating in their sleep. And there are people who will cook first and then eat all of that while sleeping. I can't cook while I'm awake. There are people who can hold conversations not only in person but even by text.

I had a look online. What I gather is that they're not the most coherent conversations most of the time, but nevertheless they will text back to you. There are people who can draw perfect drawings.

[3:22] There's a famous guy at the moment in Wales who apparently does that. And there are people who will jump into their cars and drive away, which is, of course, extremely dangerous. And we do say, don't we, I could do it in my sleep when we're talking about something that is so deeply programmed into our brains that we don't need to really think about how we're doing it as we do it.

And that really is what happens to sleepwalkers, because walking and eating, for some people cooking and driving and drawing, there are things that we do so much of that our bodies can do them in autopilot mode.

So why sleepwalking? Because I think in a way the church of Sardis is a sleepwalking church. You have a reputation of being alive, tells them Jesus in verse 1.

So the churches around Sardis, they think that Sardis is doing well. They think that Sardis is active in the mission field, that Sardis is working for the kingdom of God.

But you are dead, says Jesus. And Jesus knows. Before saying that, he says, I know your deeds. You have a reputation of being alive, but you're dead.

[4 : 36] And he knows because, as verse 1 says, he's the one who holds the seven spirits and the seven stars. It's fascinating how Jesus introduces himself with a different description in every of these seven letters.

A description that's usually tailored to the message for that church. And so here he's using the seven spirits as a picture for the Holy Spirit and the seven stars as a picture for the seven churches that he's speaking to.

And seven, you might know, is a number that throughout Scripture symbolizes completeness. So what Jesus is doing with his introduction, with the way that he presents himself here, is affirming his power.

He's affirming his total knowledge and his total wisdom. Jesus has sovereignty over his church. He has every right to speak to his churches.

He has every right to condemn. And he has every right to say, I know your deeds. Because he really does. Sardis' reputation before people, it doesn't matter to Jesus, because he sees well beyond that.

[5 : 52] And Jesus knows that the earthly reputation of this church and its real condition, they just don't match up. You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

You're sleepwalking, Sardis. Wake up. You're just doing church. And you're actually doing it so well, humanly speaking, that your neighbors actually think that you are alive, that you are awake.

Little do they know that you're actually dead. It seems that Sardis is actually putting on a great show. It's a church who looks the part, but inside it's dead.

So I wondered what that would look like at the time. I thought maybe they were meeting regularly. Maybe there were acts of charity performed in the community. Maybe the Christians in Sardis were in a religious atmosphere, but not much beyond that.

Maybe they were surrounded by the word of God, but the word of God didn't penetrate their hearts. And they were probably not growing, as there would be no compassions for souls.

[6 : 59] They were just observing Judas. They weren't actively working to be transformed and to become more like Jesus. They were possibly more interested in what the people around them thought about them than in what Jesus himself would think about them.

And this is not something surprising to Jesus, because he knows our human nature more than we do ourselves. And we probably remember the many references in the Bible to false teachers.

We had one last week as well. But Jesus did warn against false disciples too. He said in Matthew 7, Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons, and in your name perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you.

Away from me, you evildoers. The Christians in Sardis looked the part, but they were not the real deal. They were false disciples.

[8 : 07] Because being followers of Jesus should have not been about the actions they performed, but about why they performed them. Let me read two verses from Proverbs about this.

Proverbs 16.2 reads, All a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the Lord. And then Proverbs 21.2 similarly says, A person may think that their own ways are right, but the Lord weighs the heart.

Now, we must not think here that Jesus is condemning Sardis because of their works. He's not calling them to become ascetics or philosophers who shouldn't engage with the world, because that would contradict all of Jesus' teachings.

Good works are pleasing to God. They do remain pleasing to God, but they must be the result of a life grounded in faith and love for him. Whereas Sardis' works, they were incomplete, as we read in verse 2.

They were just pro forma. They were not from the spirit. They were not from the heart. So they probably become work-oriented as a church, but they were not motivated by true charity.
[9 : 21] They were just sleepwalking into that car and driving away because their bodies knew how to do it, not because they were actually intending to go anywhere. Now, this letter was not written to Brunfield Evangelical Church.

And I would really like to think that we would not get a letter like this from Jesus. But that is not to say that we don't run the same risks as Sardis, that we won't deserve one in the future if we're not careful.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who's been feeling uncomfortable thinking about this idea of sleepwalking through our Christian life. It is quite relatable, isn't it? How easy can it be for churches in our day and age to end up just like Sardis?

Well, probably fairly easy, I think, if we're honest with ourselves. So I tried to think about a few examples just to make us think about what sleepwalking could look like in our own lives.

Just a few questions. How often are we more excited to see our friends at church than someone who's new and doesn't yet believe? How often do we ask, what can I pray for you?

[10 : 30] Because that's just how Christians ask, how are you? But we won't remember the answer, let alone make actual time to pray. How often do we join a ministry? Because that person has been asking for so long.

And it will be good to meet new people anyway. Rather than because we think that by joining a ministry, we will be edifying God's church. And believe me when I say I'm talking to myself here first, I did catch myself while preparing for this very sermon, just worrying more about what people might think about it than what God would want from it.

We're all at risk of becoming like Sardis. Good service attendance, a nice Sunday morning buzz, being active in the community, having many different wonderful activities.

Those are all good things that we would hope for and strive for as signs of a healthy church. But they're not the fruit of a healthy church if they're not done for the right motivations.

Thinking back to Proverbs. If they're not for the glory of the kingdom of God, but rather for the sake of reputation on this earth.

[11 : 43] If they're not motivated by a desire to reach the unreached and see God save souls, but just to tick boxes and just feel good about ourselves. Faithful disciples making faithful disciples.

That is the fruit of a healthy church. So the questions for us as we try to learn from Sardis as a church, are we motivated by a desire to reach more people with the gospel?

Or are we motivated by reputation and performance only? Do we show a growth mindset? And on a personal level, as individuals, why do we come to services?

Why do we join ministries and activities? Why do we spend time in fellowship together? Is it for a desire to serve God and glorify his kingdom? Or is it all just about belonging to a club?

Again, as individuals, do we show a growth mindset? So what now? Jesus tells Sardis, you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

[12 : 56] Is that it? Is that Sardis as a church over? No. No, it's not. Because our God is a merciful God. And Jesus, he's our savior, isn't he? So for Sardis too, just like for the other churches, Jesus' words of condemnation are followed by the offer of a solution.

Verse 2 reads, Wake up, Sardis. So be watchful in other translations, but either way, stop sleepwalking. Be intentional about what you do. Strengthen what remains.

And then in verse 3, Jesus says, Remember what you have received and hold it fast and repent. Remember.

So much of church is about remembering. We come here every Sunday and we remember God's promises to his people as we sing together, as we reflect on his word.

We remember Jesus' sacrifice as we take communion. We even take elements just to make that act of remembrance more physical, to help us remember. We meet in small groups.

[14 : 06] We remind each other of how Jesus has blessed and how he's still blessing us in our private lives. Remember what you've received and heard.

He's telling them, remember the message of the gospel. Remember that message that turned your life around. And then hold it fast. Keep it close. Don't depart from it.

As Joshua 1.8 reads, Keep this book of the law always on your lips. Meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then it will be prosperous and successful.

Really, Jesus is telling Sardis to do the opposite of what they've been doing so far. He's telling them, don't lose track of why you are at church. Don't depart from the word so that you won't even know why you're doing what you're doing anymore.

And then repent. Acknowledge your sin. Acknowledge that you've been missing the point. Don't recognize that you are dead. And then turn around. Remember, hold fast, repent.

[15:13] That is what will strengthen what is left that is still alive. But if you don't, and here's the warning, I will come to you like a thief.

Jesus promises a special visit to this church. It will be its end. Remember, hold fast, and repent. And that's the solution for us as well, friends.

Every time that we're noticing wrong patterns, sleepwalking tendencies, so to speak, when our priorities aren't quite right, let's realign things by making sure that church is a place of remembrance, that church is a place of holding fast to the word.

Everything we do as a church must revolve around God's word. Not reputation, not personal gain. So can I invite us all to inspect our hearts, to come to our God in prayer, maybe later this afternoon, and ask for forgiveness for those situations when we go through the motions as Christians, as members of our local church.

Let's ask God to help us be watchful, like he tells Sardis to, and to strengthen us. Because we want to be well and alive.

[16:30] We want to be tools in God's hands. We want to be working for the glory of his kingdom. In the second part of the letter, as we said, Jesus gives Sardis words of hope.

So let's look at verses 4 to 6 now. The Christians who walk the walk. He says in verse 4, Yet you have a few people in Sardis who've not soiled their clothes.

They will walk with me dressed in white, for they are worthy. There are a few people in Sardis who've not soiled their clothes. And soiling one's clothes usually refers to sexual immorality, which we've seen called doubt in other churches' letters to.

Last week we did as well. And so in Sardis as well, it seems that sin was being tolerated, and that it had probably started to coexist with regular church life.

And really, if we think about it, it should be no surprise that people who had lost track of the gospel, who were asleep walking through their Christian lives, would have become desensitized to sin.

[17:43] Because if we are building our reputation before our neighbors rather than before God, then of course our priorities and our private life will also be about what the world thinks rather than what God wants from us.

But Jesus sees, I know your deeds, he said. And so just like he knows the deeds of those people who have a reputation of being alive but are actually dead, he also knows the deeds of these few people who haven't soiled their clothes.

And if he had a warning for the first group, I will come like a thief and you will not know at what time. Here is a promise, a beautiful promise for the second.

For the Christians who are walking the walk, he says, they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they're worthy. Let's not make the mistake of thinking that the few people, that they're worthy because they don't sin.

We all sin, everyone sins, only Jesus didn't sin. And they're not worthy simply because of the good actions. Because we all do good actions. And if you think about it, we're still in the context of a church who's actually being declared dead despite plenty of humanly speaking good deeds, which gained its good reputation.

[18:58] So it's not about that. Those who didn't soil their garments, they're worthy because they held fast to the gospel. So in other words, because they're being faithful to Jesus.

And so here comes the hope. Here comes that hope that reverts everything. The hope that makes the dead alive. The hope that makes the lost found. Verse 5.

The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. Other translations say, the one who conquers. And that's those who repent.

That's those who took that warning seriously, who listened to it. Those words of condemnation.

That's those who have ears to hear and come to their knees before God and ask him for forgiveness and reset their lives and hold fast to the gospel moving forward.

So again, what would that look like for us? If we go back to those very practical examples, is it maybe telling a friend at the end of the service, sorry, catch you later.

[20 : 07] There's someone I want to speak to. And by the way, will you please pray for their salvation? And then we go to that person and talk about the sermon with them. Maybe it's asking people, what can I pray for you?

And then actually pray with them there and then, whether that's in the middle of a church hall or in a cafe, because what do I care what people think? We're praying to the God of the universe. Maybe it's not joining a ministry just to meet people.

And it's certainly not joining any ministries either. But it's prayerfully considering where our talents would be best spent for the upbuilding of God's church.

And maybe it's right, it certainly is right in that sermon so that it conveys God's message and not what I would like the passage to say. So these are just some very practical ways, simple ways in a way that holding fast to the gospel can look like in real life.

This is what being victorious, what being faithful to Jesus will look like in our everyday life. But even though these might seem like simple ways, they're not easy, they're not comfortable most of the time, they're not convenient from an earthly point of view.

[21 : 17] But it's worth it. Because if we live putting the gospel first in this way, then Jesus promises us eternal glory with the Father.

Nothing less than eternal glory with the Father. Let's read verse 5. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but I will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. What a complete reversal. Imagine being the people in Sardis, getting this message from Jesus, and hear Jesus' words move from the stark admonishment, from the condemnation at the start of the letter, you're dead, wake up, all the way to the promise of eternal glory with him.

An eternal glory that is not out of reach. It's not out of reach for them. It's not out of reach for us. It's not out of reach for anyone. They all can be victorious so long as they're faithful to Jesus.

This promise here is more than any reward that we can imagine. It's described in different beautiful ways in each letter.

[22 : 28] And I think that here Jesus emphasizes its permanence. He's saying your name will be on the book of life and no one can take someone's name off the book of life once it's there.

And that name will be acknowledged before the Father, before God, and before his angels. You know when people call into a talk radio show to say happy birthday to their gran or to say hi to a friend or someone else?

Now, I'm not judging if any of you guys like to do that, but I do have a question for you. What if that person is not listening? Like, I might be mistaken, but I think all that happens is that a lot of strangers will hear some person's name that means napping to them.

That's pretty much it. Well, that's not quite the picture that we're looking at here. Because when someone's name is acknowledged before God and his angels, that's permanent.

And God will not miss it. He will tune in. He won't be busy doing something else. It's an acknowledgement which means eternal glory. That is the ultimate reward which will expect the Christians who trust God, not themselves.

[23 : 43] The Christians who put the gospel into practice, not their own desires. And this promise is not just for the Christians in Sardis. This is the same promise that we see throughout the gospel.

It's for all of us. So if any of us are hearing about this promise today for the first time, I really hope that we're blown away.

none of this is out of reach for anyone. All that Jesus is asking is that we walk with him. That's what he says in verse 4.

He's asking that we are faithful. Friends, do we understand what is at stake here? It's our eternal life. It's being on the book of life on one hand and being eternally dead on the other hand.

It's being acknowledged before the God of the universe versus being rejected by him. This is an amazing message of hope.

[24 : 49] But we do need to appreciate the urgency that there is to it. We need to repent now. We need to stop soiling our garments. We need to stop tolerating sin and walk with Jesus.

And I want to invite us all to really not underestimate Jesus' warning in verse 3. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief.

We mustn't think that this warning only applies to Sardis. This warning is true for all of us who are coasting through Christian life.

God's judgment is to be taken seriously. But so is his message of hope and salvation. Let's hear the warning. Let's let the warning sink in.

And then let's act on it. Let's change course. Let's stand firm in the gospel and actually live Christian lives with all their battles.

[25 : 50] And there's many, but it is worth it. So as we conclude, let me say again, I know that this is a challenging message. I've been mulling over this passage for a while now and I'm still finding it challenging as I speak about it now.

It really feels like as if the Bible knew our weaknesses. It really hits where it hurts. It's so easy to identify with the struggles of the Christians in Sardis, with the temptation to just go with the flow, to fall asleep, to go through the motions, to just do whatever gets us the praise of people.

We'll deal with God's will later. We've got time to be the church who looks the part, to be the Christians who look the part. But we don't know when Jesus is coming.

And the more we stay asleep, the more difficult it will be to strengthen what remains. And however difficult the message, however difficult this exhortation to fight our human inclinations, the hope in front of us is bigger.

It's so much bigger. No human words will ever convey it fully, certainly not mine. So can I ask you to read through these verses again at home, read through the rest of Revelation, come to the service tonight about heaven.

[27 : 14] Revelation is some description of God's glory, isn't it? And the hope that awaits us. The one who's holding out his hand is the one who also holds the seven spirits and the seven stars.

We have ears to hear. So let's not be a church who looks the part. Let's be Christians who walk the walk.

Let's aim for growth, individually and as a congregation. Let's strengthen each other in our Christian life and as we work for the spread of the gospel.

Let's pray to God that the Spirit will actually soften our hearts and give us compassion. Give us compassion. for the souls. Let's be watchful.

Let's be ready for Jesus' coming because the joy that we shall experience at receiving his reward will be greater than anything that anyone can imagine.

[28 : 15] Let's pray. Father, thank you for your word. Thank you for your word. Thank you because we have it. Thank you because through it we can know what's expected of us, Father, what you want from us.

Thank you for all the challenges that we find in it, Father. Thank you because it encourages us to become more like Jesus. and thank you, Father, because we know through your word that you know us.

You know us so well and because we can find so many words in there which so clearly just speak to our hearts, which so clearly knows where we're at in our lives and the context that we're in and all the challenges that are around us, all the temptations.

And thank you, Father, for all the passages in the Bible like these letters where we can see your love demonstrated by speaking to us, talking to us, coming and meeting us where we are, Father, to encourage us, to spur us on.

To just change course, Father. So we confess today, Father, that we sin in many of the ways that Sardis did as well, Father.

[29 : 45] I would just ask for your help, for your spirit to work in our personal lives and in us as a church, as a congregation, Father, so that we can be Christians who walk the walk, Christians who will be pleasing to you, Christians who work for the advancement of the kingdom of God, Father.

Thank you because we can have this relationship with you through Jesus' death and resurrection, Father, where we can come to you and just repent, confess our sins and then move forward.

So, Father, we really pray that what we've heard tonight will have an impact on our lives starting today, Father, that we will work on those aspects in our lives where we need to change, where we need to improve.

Father, we pray all of this in Jesus' name. Amen. to hear. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[31 : 04] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.