

**Sardis – the Dead Church**  
Spilman Memorial Baptist Church  
Dr. H. Powell Dew, Jr.  
May 5, 2024

Text: Revelation 3:1-6

Purpose: Some churches are beautiful to look at but are only shells of what they actually represent. In this sermon, we will examine the church at Sardis and discover why churches die.



A man came home from work and found his three children outside, still in their pajamas, playing in the mud, with empty food boxes and wrappers strewn all around the front yard.

The door of his wife's car was open, as was the front door to the house and there was no sign of the dog.



Proceeding into the entry, he found an even bigger mess. A lamp had been knocked over, and the throw rug was wadded against one wall. In the front room the TV was loudly blaring a cartoon channel, and the family room was strewn with toys and various items of clothing. In the kitchen, dishes filled the sink, breakfast food was spilled on the counter, the fridge door was open wide, dog food was spilled on the floor, a broken glass lay under the table, and a small pile of sand was spread by the back door.

He quickly headed up the stairs, stepping over toys and more piles of clothes, looking for his wife. He was worried she might be ill, or that something serious had happened. He was met with a small trickle of water as it made its way out the bathroom door. As he peered inside, he found wet towels, scummy soap and more toys strewn over the floor. Miles of toilet paper lay in a heap and toothpaste had been smeared over the mirror and walls.



As he rushed to the bedroom, he found his wife still curled up in the bed in her pajamas, reading a novel. She looked up at him, smiled, and asked how his day went. He looked at her bewildered and asked, "What happened here today?"

She again smiled and answered, "You know every day when you come home from work and you ask me what in the world I do all day?"

"Yes," was his incredulous reply.

She answered, "Well, today I didn't do it."<sup>1</sup>



Over the years, I have had many conversations with individuals and ministers about their congregations. They described their church as one that has good preaching and committed leaders, but the members in the church acted like the congregation was simply a country club. A place where you can mix and mingle with like-minded people, where you can enjoy a common activity, and go home unchanged or unchallenged. The Church is not a Country Club.

As I have listened to many of my fellow ministers describe their churches. I have come away from those conversations with a great deal of sadness because it seems as if the pastor is the only one listening to the Spirit of God while the rest of the congregation simply doesn't get the message. I have even heard a few of my fellow minister's say that their church was dying and they simply don't know what to do to revive it.



Many pastors have resorted to bringing in new programs or beginning a new teaching series.

They may turn to Lifeway and purchase the latest lesson in a kit and hope that will revive their congregation. Other churches turn to their music program and attempt to bring "contemporary" music into the morning mix in hopes of attracting a younger crowd.



Some ministers have tried to encourage their members to "come as you are" in attempts to minimize the stereotype of "wearing your Sunday best." Some ministers have modified their preaching style to accommodate a generation that has shorter attention spans and has a high need for disconnected snippets of information.

Most of these attempts to revitalize a dying church through the use of these "life support" approaches, fail. If the pastor is not successful in bringing about the needed renewal and revival, then some congregations resort to firing their pastor and hiring another to repeat the pattern over again.





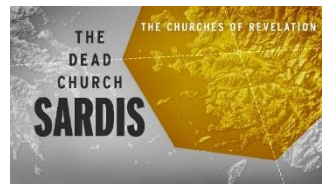
The only way a church can remain successful and alive is **through the presence of the Holy Spirit.** No amount of programming or gimmicks will duplicate a genuine

Spiritual presence among its members. It is the Holy Spirit that keeps us connected to the Living God. Each of us needs to have the presence of the Spirit of God within us in order to maintain a vibrant congregation. In chapter one of the Book of Revelation, Jesus said that the Lampstand is representative of the presence of the Holy Spirit. And if the church is not obedient to what God has called it to be and do, then that Lampstand can be removed and all that is left is a shell of its former self.

Don't buy into the thinking that that will never happen to us here at Spilman Memorial Baptist Church. Over the years, I have witnessed nearby churches close their doors, never to open again. Some of you that are here this morning may have been involved in congregations that are no longer functioning. If so, you know the Lampstand can be removed and the work of that congregation is finished. God's work is not finished, but the work of that congregation is over.

### Sardis the Impregnable City

Let us turn to Sardis, the fifth church mentioned in the opening verses of chapter three in Revelation, and see what happened with them and how we can learn from their example.



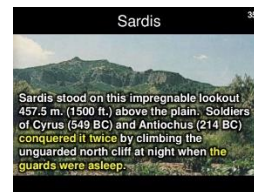
The city of Sardis was once considered to be an impregnable city of its day. The city was situated 1500 feet above the valley floor on the top of a mountain spur. It was surrounded on three sides by sheer cliffs and a narrow connection on the fourth side. One of the greatest kings of Sardis was named Croesus. He



was remembered for his great wealth because the city was located near a stream that had gold in it. It was actually one of the first cities to mint their own coins.

Unfortunately, this wealth caused him and his city to become over confident and they were defeated.

Croesus went to war against Cyrus, the king of Persia. He was defeated on the battlefield and was pushed back to his fortified city where he thought he was completely safe. Cyrus offered a reward to any soldier that could find a way to defeat the city. One soldier noticed that a soldier at the top of the hill dropped his helmet to the bottom of the rocky cliff. A short time later that same soldier appeared at the bottom to retrieve his helmet. This Persian soldier had discovered there was a hidden passage way inside the mountain.

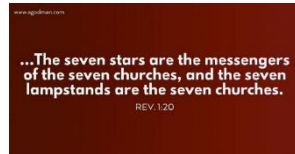


Under the cover of darkness, Persian soldiers found the opening and slipped into the city undetected. There were no guards posted because they were so confident in their security. That night the city of Sardis was defeated. To make matters worse, nearly a century later, that same city was defeated in the same manner.

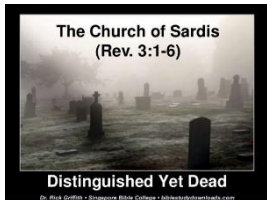
## The Message to Sardis



This fifth letter is written to Sardis. John the writer of this book, is quoting Jesus Christ who is the one that “has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.” This reference to the seven Spirits of God given to all seven churches is referencing the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. The seven stars is possibly a reference to the seven ministers or pastors leading those congregations. Jesus is saying to the church that He has complete control over the pastors of the seven churches.



In verse two, Jesus does not begin his comments like he has with the other churches. He begins quickly by saying, “*I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.*” Jesus understands the good they had done. He knows the name of the church and the individuals located in that church. He realizes the church is continuing



to meet regularly and worship together, demonstrating some form of being an alive, functioning congregation. But, Jesus calls them dead. D-E-A-D

Sardis may have been the birthplace of the “nominal Christian.” We all have met a nominal Christian. They quickly claim the label, “Christian,” but their words, actions, and fruit demonstrate something very unchristian. David Jeremiah, in his book, *Escape the Coming Night*, describes this church as more like a mausoleum than a church. It was a well-kept place, filled with dead men’s bones.



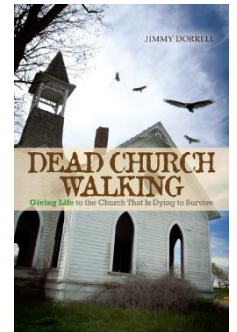
Isaiah spoke of individuals that spoke words of praise, while their hearts were far from God. (Isaiah 29:13). On the outside everything looks great, but the Lord knows the hearts and minds of each member. Jesus even rebuked the Pharisees and called them hypocrites because they gave money, fasted, and said prayers, all for recognition and praise. Jesus described them as whitewashed tombs filled with dead men’s bones. (Matthew 23)

Sardis was rebuked in verse two because their works were not found perfect before God. They had begun a few good works, but they were not completed. It was as if they were still infants and they had never matured.



There is a popular television program called, “The Walking Dead.” I have watched about 10 minutes of the show and called it quits. Jesus in some ways is calling Sardis a Walking Dead church.

John Stott once said, “We can have a fine choir, and expensive organ, good music, great anthems and fine congregational singing. We can mouth hymns and psalms with impeccable elegance, while our minds wander and our hearts are far from God. We can have pomp and ceremony, color and ritual, liturgical exactness and ecclesiastical splendor, and yet be offering a worship which is not perfect or “fulfilled” in the sight of God.” If that doesn’t wake you up to the sober reality that a church could be dead and not know it, then I don’t know what will.



Jesus gives the church at Sardis some direction as to what they are to do in order to make it alive again. In the church at Sardis, there were three groups of people in the congregation. There were the unsaved persons, the carnal Christians (those that acted like they were unsaved), and the small remnant of Christians who loved God and were trying to make the church into what it should be.

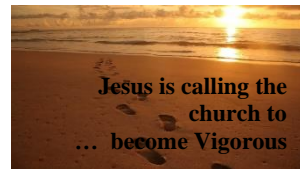
### **Jesus is calling the church to .... Be Vigilant**

Jesus is saying to the church, “You are about ready to lose everything you have. In My eyes, I have already seen you are dead. There is a little left and if you are not vigilant in remaining faithful that will be lost as well.” Paul wrote to the Ephesians and said a similar thing. “*Awake, you who sleep, Arise from the dead.*” (Ephesians 5:14)



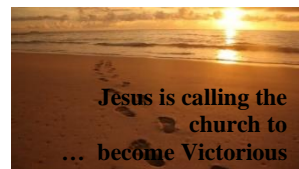
### **Jesus is calling the church to .... Become Vigorous**

Jesus is also saying to the true believers they are to vigorously strengthen the remnant that remains. There were a few that had not “defiled their garments.” They needed to be built up and encouraged. God always has a remnant that remains faithful.



### **Jesus is calling the church to .... Become Victorious**

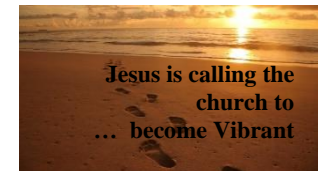
This is another word of encouragement from Christ for the believers to become victorious. When physical



death occurs in a person, the spirit is separated from the body. I have been with several people when they died and it happens quietly and mysteriously. The life of the person leaves them. The same can be said for a church as well. When the Lampstand leaves a church, it dies as well. Verse three says, “*Remember therefore how you have received and heard.*” When we are born again, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. When a church is filled with Holy Spirit filled members, the church will be Holy Spirit filled. When the Spirit is not invited into the lives of church members, that church begins to die. They become more dead than alive. We need to regain the victory we once had when we first invited Christ into our life.

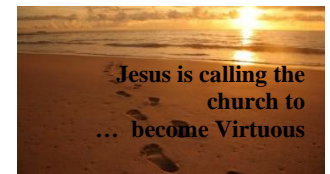
### **Jesus is calling the church to .... Become Vibrant**

The next phrase tells us to “*hold fast.*” This encourages us to be faithful to our doctrine and belief. If the church is ever to have any hope of become alive again, we must hold fast to the truth about Jesus Christ, and thus we will have a vibrant faith and belief.



### **Jesus is calling the church to .... Become Virtuous**

Jesus also told them to “*repent.*” It is a command to restore virtue. Since there were only a few faithful members in the church, the call for the congregation to “repent” was needed. If they repent, they can be counted as overcomers and have life restored to the church.



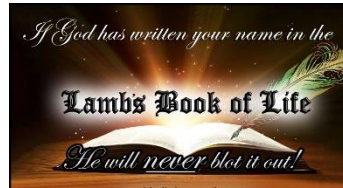
## A Message to the Overcomers



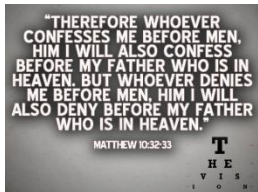
There is a promise given to those that overcome the weight of sin and repent. Verse five says they shall be “*clothed in white.*” If you turn over to

Revelation 19:8, you will notice the linen garments the church will be clothed in is their righteous acts. What kind of righteous acts are we displaying as individuals? What kind of righteous acts are we as a congregation displaying? If we were, what color would our clothing be? White and pure - or muddy and spotted? True overcomers are clothed in bright white righteousness.

Another promise we have is that we are allowed to keep our names in the Book of Life.



Ancient cities would keep a list of all citizens. If a citizen was convicted of a crime, their name would be removed from the list. If they did some great heroic deed, their name would be embellished with gold letters. True overcomers will never have their names removed from the Book of Life.



There is also the promise to true believers to have their name mentioned to the Father by Jesus. The Bible says if we confess our Jesus before men, He will confess us before our Heavenly Father. (Matthew 10:32) If we don't acknowledge Christ while we are here on earth, then why do we think Jesus will speak on our behalf after we die? Do not be deceived, we are to confess Christ if we are to have eternal life with Him!

When we do, our names are added to the Lambs Book of Life, where our reservation in eternity will be secured. Failure to confess Jesus, results in condemnation.

## How Does a Church Die?

Before we examine how a church dies, let us look at three things that will not cause a church to die.



First, a church will not die because of an outside enemy. History has shown us time and time again that the church of Jesus Christ cannot be defeated externally. Rulers and Kings have attempted to stop the message of Christ and failed. Laws have been passed banning churches from meeting together – but they still meet in secret. Threats of death have not deterred the church.

Secondly, a church will not die by suicide. Churches simply don't stop because they take a vote and die.

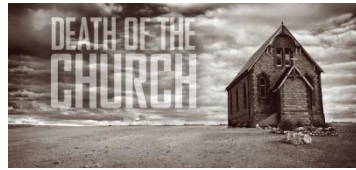
Third, a church doesn't die by abandonment. God does not abandon us. We know there was a remnant left in Sardis and they didn't die because God left them.

I met with Keith Hudson, our Neuse Baptist Associational Missions Coordinator last week so we could catch up with each other. He made a comment to me that startled me. He said he had been to an associational leadership conference recently and he is VERY concerned about the state of the church today. So many churches today have declined to the point they are near the point of closing their doors.

There is a need for genuine revival to break across the land today.

## What Causes Death

Since we are talking about Sardis, the dead church, we need to hear the truth about this topic. Why do some churches die?



First a church can die due to the death of its individual members. A church is like a human body and its individual cells. The overall health of the body is directly linked to the health of its individual cells. If some cells are cancerous, it can spread to others and cause those cells to die. A church is very similar. When the members of a church die, the church eventually closes.

Secondly, the church dies from its reliance on its past reputation. Sardis was not the only church to live in the past. But you can only focus on the past for so long before you begin to die yourself.



Vance Havner once said this about spiritual movements. They move through four stages of growth: a man, a movement, a machine, a monument. The church at Sardis had become a monument to its past and failed to live in the present. The church died in the same manner in which the city died. It was overconfident in its strength, was not diligent, and rested in its imagined strength.



Third, the church at Sardis died because it was not sensitive to its own spiritual condition. Sardis did not know it was even dead. They were only going through the motions. In the Old Testament, Samson “*did not know the Lord had departed from him.*” (Judges 16:20)

Our church needs to wake up before it is too late. We need to repent of our selfish ways and return to the things that God is calling us to do.



Christians don't lose their salvation, but their lives can so grieve the Holy Spirit that there is no life, no power, and no vibrancy in their lives. When most members of a church do that, then there is no life in the church. They become dead to the things of the Lord.

Every Christian should look at their own life; examine their own involvement and their own commitment to Christ. When we do, we will see how alive our church actually is. Aubrey Jones, the former Pastor at First Baptist Church here in Kinston once said: “As Sunday School goes, so goes the church.” I would amend that slightly to say, “As the members of the church go, so goes the church.”

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

## LET US PRAY

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> “A Work Funny” Mikey’s Funnies, April 3, 2024 – forwarded by Wally Loney