

Revelation: A Message to Sardis

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- [0 : 00] Good morning. For anyone who doesn't know me, my name is Eric Scott. I'm the youth director here at Watermark Church. As most of you know, I got engaged recently.
- And contrary to any crazy rumors you may have heard, she's not actually working at the church. The last few weeks, we've been looking at the letters to the churches in Revelation.
- There's seven letters to seven different churches. Each of them has a unique set of circumstances, unique issues and trials that it is facing, and unique ways that it is responding to these trials.
- And today we're looking, as you just heard, at the church in Sardis. And what we're going to see today is that although the church at Sardis had a reputation of being alive, of being strong, actually it was dead.
- And we need to examine ourselves to see whether the same is true of us. So the first thing I want us to see about this church is that appearances aren't everything.
- [1 : 08] Appearances aren't everything. Pretty much every other church that we've looked at so far has some really serious issues going on within the church, but God finds something positive to say about each of them.
- We looked at the church at Ephesus, and they had lost their first love of God, but they endured through trials, and they wouldn't stand up, or they wouldn't tolerate false teachers. The church at Pergamum, they tolerated false teachers, and they had sexual immorality going on in the church, but they held fast their confession of Jesus' name, even to the point of death.
- Last week we looked at the church in Thyatira, and there was a false teacher they allowed into the church that led the church into sexual immorality. And there were major issues going on there, and they were eating food sacrificed to idols, but God praises them for their love, for their faith, for their service, and for their endurance.
- Each of these churches had major serious issues going on, but each of these churches had something going for them that God could look at and say, you're doing this well. See this area where you're doing well?
- Keep pushing on in that area. And today we come to a church where if you were to look at them from the outside, you would think this church has it going on. This church is alive.
- [2 : 26] This church has none of these big issues that the other churches have, and yet they're dead. You know, God comes, and he talks to the church at Sardis in this letter.
- He doesn't complain about sexual immorality. He doesn't complain about false teachers. He doesn't complain about eating food sacrificed to idols. You know, they have this reputation of being alive.
- If they were around today, their pastor would be invited to all of the big conferences because he is the expert on how to build a healthy, lively church. If he wrote this book called Building an Alive Church, Building the Living Church, maybe that could be the title, Building the Living Church.

You know, seminary students would go out and they would buy it and they would read it and they would discuss it with their friends because this guy is the expert. His church has got it going on. They've got this reputation as being a church that is alive, and yet despite all their appearances, the church is dead.

Even though everything outside looks great, there's death inside. It's like Jesus used the analogy one time about tombs. He said, you know, you're whitewashed tombs.

[3 : 38] You're painted and fresh and pretty on the outside, and inside you're full of dead men's bones. And that's the picture that we get when we look at this church in Sardis.

Everyone else is deceived concerning their spiritual health. But the scarier thing is that most likely they themselves are deceived concerning their spiritual health.

Nowhere in this letter to the church at Sardis does Jesus come and say, hey, I can't believe you guys are lying to everyone about what's really going on in your church. He doesn't rebuke them for trying to trick other churches into thinking everything's great with them when it's not.

Every indication in this letter would lead us to believe that they themselves believe the same things about themselves that everyone else believed. They looked at the church and they said, there's no false teachers here.

There's no sexual immorality here. There's no food offered to idols that's being eaten by the people here. We've got it together. And he says, there's a deeper issue.

[4 : 45] There's a bigger issue that you've missed out on. And because you're focusing on the appearances and on the outside and on your behavior, you think you're alive.

You think you have it all together when in reality, you're dead. You're a whitewashed tomb. You're pretty on the outside, but you're dead on the inside. You know, appearances don't tell us of true health.

It's really easy to look at ourselves or at our churches and assume that because certain things are going on, they are healthy. Right? Like, think about it. With our churches, there are certain things that if we look at a church, we think that church is healthy.

Like, numbers. I can't tell you how many times I've had a conversation with someone where I tell them, oh, I'm working at Watermark. And they're like, oh, how old is Watermark now? And I say, oh, you know, we're four years old.

And they say, and how big are you guys now? And I tell them, and they say, oh, that's great. God's doing great things there. No question about, like, what are you guys teaching about Jesus? No question about, do you guys love the lost in your community?

[5 : 54] No question about anything other than, how big are you? Awesome. And we have this philosophy that, you know, living things grow. If it's healthy, it's going to grow, which in some sense may be true.

But as Tobin reminded me once, weeds grow. And oftentimes faster than the plants that you actually want in your garden. Other things we look at, buildings. I was at a church in the States one time.

this church had spent tens of millions of U.S. dollars building a new auditorium for them to hold their Sunday services in. And this money that they had spent, they didn't have.

They had gone into massive debt that the church was having lots of trouble paying off. The gospel wasn't being preached there faithfully. The church had sacrificed their ability to reach out to the community because they were crippled by the debt that they had from this new auditorium.

and one day this guest preacher comes in, a very well-respected guy. He gets up to start preaching and he opens the sermon by saying, you know, I can tell just by looking at this building that God is doing great things here.

- [7 : 04] He looked at the external appearances. He looked at the facilities and judged how God was working at the church based on that and had a totally wrong judgment about what was happening because he was looking at the wrong thing.
- Programs, we think the more that's going on at the church, the healthier that church is, the better that church is. The music, does the music put me in the right mood to worship, to connect with God?
- We look at all these different things to determine whether a church is healthy or not, but are they the right things? And then personally, we look at ourselves and we try and figure out how am I doing in my walk with God?
- Maybe we look at church attendance. You know, I've been at church every week for the last month. I'm doing great. Or church involvement.
- You know, they wouldn't have asked me to sing in the choir if I wasn't doing okay in my relationship with God. It's scary to me the times in my life that I've like known that there are issues in my relationship with God that I need to deal with.
- [8 : 15] And I brush them off because I'm like, you know, they asked me to preach this week and they wouldn't ask me to preach if I was really that messed up, right? If we're looking at our service, we're looking at the wrong place.
- We're looking at appearances. We're looking at what other people think about us, about our reputation, rather than this primary, most important thing. Maybe we look at obedience to God's commands.
- You know, I'm not sleeping with my girlfriend, so I must have something good going for me with God. I'm not robbing the banks. My relationship with God must be okay. Or the opinions of others.
- We know something's messed up in our relationship with God, but someone comes up to us and they say, you know, you're a really strong Christian and you encourage and inspire me to follow Christ more.
- And we think, eh, I can't be doing that bad, right? It's scary to me the number of times that's happened with me where I know something is messed up in my heart and someone comes up and they're like, you know, you're a really strong Christian.
- [9 : 20] You encourage me. You inspire me to follow God more. And I think to myself, if they say that about me, I can't really be that messed up, right? The problem is, while all of these things are good, while numbers in a church, it's great to have a big church.
- Or great to have good facilities in your church. Great to have programs. Great to go to church. I'm not saying don't go to church. It's great to be involved when you're at church.
- But none of these things are the primary thing that indicates spiritual health in a church or in us as individuals. There's something bigger.
- There's something more important. And that's Christ. We need to look at Jesus and our relationship with him to determine spiritual health for us as individuals and as churches.
- If a church has lots of numbers and has great facilities and has dynamic speakers but doesn't teach about Jesus, it's dead.
- [10 : 27] If we're going to church every week and we're involved in church and we're singing in the choir and we're playing in the band, we're teaching Sunday school but we aren't loving Jesus, we're dead.
- Even if we're following all the rules, even if we're doing everything right, even if we're putting our money in the offering every week, if we miss out on a relationship with Jesus, if we miss out on the gospel, the fact that we're sinners that have separated ourselves from God, that we desperately need Jesus to forgive us, to restore us to that relationship with God, we can have everything right on the outside.

All our appearances can be great and in reality we're nothing more than a tomb, painted white so it looks nice, full of dead men's bones inside.

Appearances aren't everything. The second thing I want us to see from this church at Sardis is that assumptions are deadly.

Assumptions are deadly. Now there's not actually a lot that we know about this church at Sardis so a lot of what I'm going to say today is sort of somewhat speculation based off pretty, I think, good guesses based on what we see here.

[11 : 49] But we do know a little bit about the city of Sardis and one thing that we know about the city of Sardis is that it was a very strategic military city. It was built up on top of a hill and sort of the city went down into the valley but on top of this hill they had a fortress that no attacking army could get into.

They had the high ground, they had a strong building on top of it and to make it easier to defend one side of this hill was a cliff that was so steep that no one could climb up it which meant that even when they were under attack they had the high ground, they had this great building to keep them safe and they only had to defend against two or three sides not in every direction at once.

It was a very strategic military city but the problem is twice, not once in their history but twice in their history about 200 years or so apart from each other their strongest point became their weakest point on two different occasions.

You'd think they would have learned after the first time but they didn't. They were under attack the first time by the Persians the second time by the Greeks. They were under attack and the attacking army brought all their forces up against the front gate of the fortress and started attacking and attacking and attacking and the people that were in the city at the time defended against this front gate and while they were being attacked at the front gate a couple of attackers climbed up this unclimbable cliff under the cover of darkness snuck through the fortress opened up the front gate from the inside and let their troops in and the first time it happens it's understandable you think no one can climb the cliff but 200 years later the exact same thing happened.

You think that they would have learned just leave one guy back there to look and make sure they're not climbing up the cliff. They didn't learn their lesson. This point that they thought was their strongest point their best wall of defense this cliff that no one can get up turned out to be their biggest weakness because they left it completely undefended and they allowed the attackers to get in through their backs without them noticing because they were so distracted by the fighting up front.

[14 : 07] And I think there's a really good reason to believe that the church at Sardis was going through a similar experience to those soldiers. Looking at the other letters that we've been reading there's good reason to believe that there were attacks and temptations coming from every side.

False teachers sexual immorality other stuff from the world just coming at them saying come follow join in. And like I said there's nothing in this letter indicating that they were doing any of that stuff.

They were probably doing a good job fighting against the false teachers at least somewhat. They were probably doing a good job fighting against sexual immorality. But the problem is they put their primary focus on these things rather than on maintaining a relationship with Christ.

And as they did this well as they said hey we're sexually pure yes they began to find their identity in these external behaviors rather than in their relationship with Christ.

Satan kept them distracted by these things that seemed to be big issues at the front gates and subtly crept in the back and crumbled their relationship with Christ because they were so distracted by these other issues.

[15 : 27] And because of that they were able to maintain this appearance of being alive when in reality the life was slowly falling and fading out of the church.

And this is a big issue in the church even today. You know back in the late 1900s there was a group of pastors and Christian leaders in America who looked around at the moral scene in America and said this is a mess.

We need to stand up for proper morals. And they got together and they formed some groups. You've probably heard of them things like the moral majority the religious right. And they said we need to stand up for what's right.

They said we need to fight against things like abortion or sexual promiscuity that's coming up all across our nation. And while I'm all about standing up for morality the problem with this group is that as they did this a lot of times they would implicitly spread the message that if you do these things that is what makes you a Christian.

You are a Christian not because you love Jesus but because you rally against the doctors who perform abortions. You are a Christian not because you love Jesus but because you vote for the right presidential candidate.

[16 : 45] And these leaders implicitly spread the message that Christianity is more about what you do than it is about loving Jesus.

It's more about what you do than about who you are. And it's led to my generation being brought up believing that Christianity is about our actions and what we do and who we hate and not about loving Jesus.

And now don't get me wrong I'm not saying we shouldn't stand for morality but look at the fruits that have come from this. There are in the states today there are so many Christians who are looking to prominent Mormon leaders for spiritual and moral leadership because these guys stand for the same morals that Christians stand for.

When fundamentally they believe different things about the identity of who God is and we shouldn't be looking to them for spiritual leadership. And now I know that's one extreme of the pendulum and there's another extreme of the pendulum maybe that would say forget about morals it's just about a relationship with Christ so we can do whatever we want.

God's going to forgive us anyway so let's go sleep around. Let's go do what we want and not worry about the consequences and I'm absolutely not advocating that. The Bible says that God has a moral code that he expects us to follow.

[18 : 11] But there's a third way that Christianity offers us. Not by defining ourselves by our morality and clinging to Christ. And it says that if we do that our behavior will change.

We will become more like him. But that's a secondary thing. It's something that happens in response to who we already are. It's not what makes us a Christian. It's what happens in our lives because of the fact that we're already Christians.

And so just like the church at Sardis the church today is so susceptible to these attacks. To seeing a big issue on the horizon and focusing on that and losing our sight of Christ in the process.

And when we see ourselves fighting against these big issues well and we think we're doing great we have this assumption that we as a church are alive and strong when the foundation that the church is built on has crumbled from our lives.

The assumption is deadly. The third thing I want us to see about this church at Sardis is that current circumstances don't seal our fate.

[19 : 27] Current circumstances don't seal our fate. You know Christ comes to this church and he says you guys have a great reputation. Everyone thinks you got it going on.

Everyone thinks you're great. Everyone thinks you're the church to look at and you're not. You're dead. But I'm not giving up on you. I'm not abandoning you and saying it's over.

No he gives him a challenge. He says wake up 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.

He says I'm giving you another chance. You've messed up a lot. but I forgive. I'm the God who forgives.

I'm the God who gives second and third and fourth and fifth chances. I'm giving you another one. Wake up. Yeah a lot of you are dead but it's not too late.

[20 : 37] Judgment hasn't come yet. It may soon but it hasn't yet. And I think if we here today feel that as we listen to this that our lives sort of reflect this church at Sardis that we have everything going on good on the outside but on the inside this relationship with Christ that's fundamental has sort of crumbled.

God's telling us it's not too late for you. Wake up. Repent. You know I had a startling reminder this week of how short life can be.

One of my friends, he's younger than I am, had a heart attack, a very serious one. He survived this reminder that at any moment none of us knows when our time is going to come.

This guy was in his early 20s, heart attack. None of us knows when our time is and God's calling us to wake up right now.

So I have some questions that I want us to think about today. The first one, if God were writing one of these letters to you, like he's writing to the seven churches, what would he say in it?

[21 : 56] What would he list off as your strengths? What would he list off as your weaknesses? What would he list off as your weaknesses? Would the overall mood of the letter be a positive thing?

Like, good job, you're holding fast to Christ, you're standing up for me? Or would it be something like the church at Sardis?

You know, everyone else thinks that you've got it going on, but you don't. Or would it just be, you don't even pretend. Everyone knows that you're not following me. And I want to be careful with this because I know that we live in this culture where we're perfectionist and we hold ourselves to this super high standard that if I get 99% on the exam and miss one question, then it's basically the same as failing.

And I don't want us to judge ourselves super harshly, but at the same time, I also know that we have this tendency to justify ourselves, to approve of actions in ourselves that we would never approve of in others, to overlook our faults, to overlook our failures and our weaknesses because we want ourselves to be better.

And so my challenge is, think honestly about it. Where is our hope? We were saying earlier, my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

[23 : 25] Is that actually where our hope is? Or is our hope built on our morality? Is our hope built on our church attendance? Is our hope built on our reputation, whether we deserve that reputation or not?

My second question for us today is, where is our battle? You know, the city of Sardis, they had fights, they had lots of battles because it was such a strategic city.

And like we saw, their huge weakness that happened to them twice was that the place they thought they were the strongest was actually the place where they were the weakest.

The place they thought they didn't need to defend was the place where the enemies were able to get in. And the Bible tells us that for each of us, our lives are a battle. That every day there's a war going on for our souls and the souls of everyone around us where God is saying, hey, come follow me.

And Satan is trying to distract us and show us why we don't need God and convince us that God's not really as good as he says he is. There's a battle. And Satan loves to distract us from this battle.

[24 : 45] One of his primary tactics is making us so comfortable we forget there is a battle. But where is our battle? Have we forgotten that we're in a battle?

If so, we're already losing. But if we know we're in a battle, are we focusing on the right enemies? You know, this church at Sardis, they were probably fighting very vigilantly to stand up for their morality, to stand up for what they saw as right.

They were fighting so hard, but all their focus, all their attention, all their energy was on the wrong part of the battle. they left a deadly weakness that killed them.

And in our lives, yes, we struggle against a lot of things. There's temptation all around us every day. Temptation to conform to what our boss wants rather than what Christ wants.

temptation to sort of blend in and fit in with the crowd and not stand up for the fact that we actually believe in Jesus. temptation sexually everywhere in our culture.

[26 : 03] All sorts of temptations. And it's good to fight against these things. But if we fight against them exclusively and lose sight of the primary battle, which is the battle for us to hold on to Christ, then no matter how hard we fight, no matter how well we fight, we're going to lose because we're fighting primarily against the wrong enemy.

You know, there was a time in my life when I was relatively new in Hong Kong. I struggled a lot with loneliness during this time. I was settling in a new city, and I just didn't know how to cope with the loneliness.

And there was definitely this spiritual battle going on. And in my youth and immaturity, I didn't know the proper response to it.

And I could see that there were spiritual elements to it, but I couldn't see the full picture. And I began to focus primarily on this problem of loneliness and fighting against it rather than primarily on holding on to Christ and clinging to him.

And so what I would do is whenever I felt this loneliness, I would find ways to cope with it. I would watch TV or a movie because that would make the loneliness go away until the end of the episode.

[27 : 33] I would hang out with friends because when I was around people, I wasn't lonely. I would read a book or play guitar or focus really hard on my work. What I found was that each of these things that I would do, did get me through the day.

They'd numb the pain long enough for me to go to bed that night and wake up the next morning. The problem was, as I continued to focus exclusively on this feeling of loneliness rather than focusing on Christ, I fought and fought and fought and inside me, the life was crumbling apart.

And I knew it. people would come up to me and they'd see that I had this great reputation because I'm working in the church. I'm impacting people's lives and things must be great for me.

And I knew I'm a fake. I remember one time someone was praying for me during this time. They were like, Eric, as I pray, I just see this picture.

I don't have any idea what it means, but I see this castle. And it's big and it's beautiful and it has these huge like turrets or something on top of it.

[28 : 56] And it's nice and painted fresh on the outside and it looks so strong. But then inside, it's just crumbling apart. There's no one there. Everything inside it is dead.

And I knew that that was a description of my life at that moment. There's this beautiful castle. Anyone who looked at it from the outside said, it's great.

Because I was focusing on the wrong battle. Because I was focusing on this battle of the way that I felt rather than on focusing on knowing Christ and loving him.

I kept up all the external appearances. I kept up the great reputation when I was dead. And thankfully, God has brought people into my life who have called me out on that and helped me work through that and helped point me back to Christ.

But I know that this tendency is so common in the church today. We see a problem, we know that it's wrong. And yet we focus on that problem rather than on Christ.

[30 : 02] And as we focus on that problem, it draws us further and further from Christ. And while we do a great job defeating that problem, the life crumbles because we lose hold of Christ.

I mean, think about it. How many guys groups are out there in churches around the world focused on fighting against porn? And what's the approach? Don't do porn. Don't do porn. Don't do porn.

And as you're focusing on this, your focus is always on porn. It's a focus on don't do it, but it's still a focus on porn. And you're never focusing on Christ. It's rampant in the church.

We focus on our problems rather than on Christ, just like the church at Sardis. We're able to have great behavior, great reputations on the outside.

And the life is crumbling inside. But there's hope. Just like the church in Sardis, there's hope for us. Jesus didn't give up on them.

[31 : 04] Jesus isn't giving up on us. He tells them, wake up. And he tells us, wake up. He tells them, you haven't been doing a good job.

But it's not over. There's still time. There's still a chance. And if you turn to me, if you trust in me, there's still a reward waiting for you.

He says, you still have a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. This white garments, this white clothing, it's a picture of purity and holiness and victory.

And Jesus promises that to those who will walk with him, not just in appearance, but in truth and reality. He continues on.

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. This word for conquer that he uses here, it means to win in the face of obstacles, to be the victor, to conquer or overcome.

[32 : 16] So this is not going to be easy. But it's possible. It's going to be a battle. You're going to have to fight. But when your strength comes from me, you have the power to win.

And when you look to me, when you trust in me, he says, I will give you the strength to overcome, to be a conqueror. I will never blot your name out of the book of life.

We'll be welcomed into God's kingdom if we hold on to Christ, if we hold fast to him. He continues, I will confess his name before my father and before his angels.

Jesus says, look, if you do these things, if you hold on to me, not just appearing to follow me, but truly trusting in me, truly being desperate for me, I won't be ashamed to be called your God.

When the day comes when you're at judgment and you're standing before the father, I will be standing there next to you. I'll say, Father, this one's with me. Let him in.

[33 : 31] Father, I love this one. I died for him, for her, so that you can accept them.

There is hope. There is a promise. God's love. It requires that we wake up. We can't rest on our appearances. We can't rest on our assumptions.

We can't rest on our reputations. We can't rest on our obedience. We have to rest in Christ, in Christ alone.

I don't know what it means for everyone in here to wake up today. Maybe for some of us, we've never trusted in Christ before. And waking up means for the first time ever acknowledging our need for him.

Acknowledging that we are messed up, that we need him to forgive us and save us and give us this new relationship with God. Maybe for some of us, you're like me, where you have this issue in your life and you're fighting against it, but you realize, I'm fighting against and against and against this issue, but never fighting to hold on to Christ.

[34 : 43] And waking up means turning and holding on to Christ. Maybe some of us in here, we're doing great at all these things. We're holding on to Christ.

And he's calling us to strengthen what remains, to turn to the person next to us and help them do that in their life too. Regardless of where you are, Jesus is calling us to wake up, strengthen what remains, turn to him, look to him, rest in him, find our identity in him, in him alone.

Let's pray. Jesus, we thank you for your love. We thank you that you are the God who forgives, who gives second chances and third chances and fourth chances, who hasn't given up on us, but is giving us the chance even today to wake up, to repent, to come back, even if we've wandered far away.

We pray that we would see you, we would know you, we would trust you and follow you, that we wouldn't just have an appearance of being alive, but that we would truly be alive.

and that one day we'd be able to walk with you in these white garments, that our names would not be blotted out of the book of life. And that at that day, when we stand before the Father, that you'll be standing there beside us, saying that we are yours and you are ours.

[36 : 28] In Jesus' name, amen. And I saw CO250. Can you ask someone to raise your hand in both girls' layout and Doug Smith? Yes. You may be near ■■■PBN.■■■■ygstation.