

CHAPTER 3

Jesus' Evaluation of Ministry: Message to the Seven Churches

The Dead Church: A Message to Sardis

Revelation 3:1-6

What are the difference between life and death or how do you know when someone is alive or dead? There are distant characteristics of the living which separates us from the dead. For example, the living has a dependence of oxygen to breathe, but the dead does not. The living needs food to provide energy to the body, but the dead does not. The living works, plans, and sees to the operation of daily life, but the dead does not. Why is that? Why is there such a distant difference between the living and the dead? Why is our expectations only of the living?

Historical background

The important commercial city of **Sardis** was located about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira, on an important trade route that ran east and west through the kingdom of Lydia. Important industries included jewelry, dye, and textiles, which had made the city wealthy. From a religious standpoint it was a center of pagan worship and site of a temple of Artemis, which ruins still remain (cf. comments on 2:1 regarding another temple of Artemis). Only a small village called Sart remains on the site of this once-important city. Archeologists have located the ruins of a Christian church building next to the temple.¹

Revelation 3:1–6 (NASB95)

Message to Sardis

NOTE: Three Factors in Christ evaluation of the church at Sardis

1 “To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: ‘I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.’

¹ Walvoord, J. F. (1985). Revelation. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 938). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

1. Christ the Possessor of the Spirit (v. 1)

The “seven spirits” is likely a reference to the “sevenfold Holy Spirit” (from Isaiah 11:2-5) as discussed in chapter 1:4 (cf. 4:5; 5:6), this details the complete and adequate work of the Spirit; remember in our review of chapter one that “seven” is viewed as a sign of completion.

Revelation 4:5

Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And *there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God;*

Revelation 5:6

And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth.

“Christ controls the “seven stars,” which in Rev. 1:20 refers to “the seven angels of the churches.” Christ’s controlling the seven stars (angels) suggests that through their angel Christ controls the church, and it must answer to Him alone. Like the church in Ephesus (2:1, “who holds the seven stars in his right hand”), the Sardians had to understand who was sovereign in this situation.”²

The only word of approval is in actuality a word of rebuke as Christ declared that they had a **reputation** for **being alive** and apparently were regarded by their contemporaries as an effective church.³ The present text and scripture in general makes it clear that pretending does not work with Christ. Notice how He delivers the message to the heart of the members in the church. “**I know your deeds.**” This is not based on the outward appearance or fake fruit, but rather the inner heart of the people in the church. Scripture makes it clear that God searches the heart.

1 Chronicles 28:9 (NASB95)

9 “As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the Lord searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you forever.

² Grant R. Osborne (2002). *Revelation: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.

³ Walvoord, J. F. (1985). Revelation. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 938). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Psalm 139:23–24 (NASB95)

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; 24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.

Jeremiah 17:10 (NASB95)

10 “I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give to each man according to his way, According to the results of his deeds.

We see how it is that He knows their deeds, because He searches the heart. This is why He can call out the pretenders, “**That you are alive but you are dead.**” A dead church can look very much alive, and an alive church could look dead. This however, is from man’s perspective. From the perspective of Christ the heart always tells the story.

Like the Pharisees, their outer appearance was a facade hiding their lack of life.⁴

Matthew 23:27–28 (NASB95)

27 “**Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.** 28 “**So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.**

Not because more people are attending a church means that the church is alive. This concept of being alive is not based on physical things like giving, attendance, ministry involvement, community service, etc. It is completely and total based on the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit that is the life giver in the church. He calls, He convicts, He delivers, He baptizes, He regenerates, He washes, He purifies, He justifies, He seals, He gives new life, He comforts, He sanctifies, He glorifies.

This church was dead because the Holy Spirit was quenched.

2. Christ Indictment and Warning (v. 2-3)

2 **Wake up, and strengthen** the things that remain, which were about to die; for ***I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.*** 3 **So**

⁴ Walvoord, J. F. (1985). Revelation. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 938). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent.
Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.

The church of Sardis, nearly dead can be revived only if the Spirit takes over, and Christ has the power of the Spirit available for them. This is the one place in the seven letters where the normal formula for what they are doing right (“I know your deeds”) actually details their key weakness. There is little good to say about this church. Rather than providing a commendation like the churches before the evaluator in this case quickly brings an indictment and warning.

Christ indictment to the church at Sardis comes in a five step process that if they complete this process they would enter into good standing with the One who holds the seven Spirits and the seven stars, and the seven angels.

But first notice in the mist of the process the Evaluator states:

I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. They were falling short of fulfilling their obligations as believers.

Now take note of the process:

- a. Wake up
- b. Strengthen
- c. Remember – what you have **receive** and **heard**
- d. Keep it
- e. Repent

Or you will be judged!!!

3. Christ Invitation and promise to the godly remnant (vv. 4-6)

4 ‘But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. 5 ‘He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. 6 ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

Observe the term “remnant.”

2 Kings 19:30–31 (NASB95)

30 ‘The surviving remnant of the house of Judah will again take root downward and bear fruit upward. 31 ‘For out of Jerusalem will go forth a remnant, and out of Mount Zion survivors. The zeal of the LORD will perform this.

Isaiah 10:20–22 (NASB95)

20 Now in that day the remnant of Israel, and those of the house of Jacob who have escaped, will never again rely on the one who struck them, but will truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel. 21 A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. 22 For though your people, O Israel, may be like the sand of the sea, *only* a remnant within them will return; a destruction is determined, overflowing with righteousness.

Romans 11:5 (NASB95)

5 In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to *God’s* gracious choice.

SOME MAY LOOK AT VERSE 5 AND THINK THAT ONE COULD LOSE THEIR SALVATION; BUT THAT IS NOT THE CASE.

John 5:4

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

John 6:35-39

35. Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst. 36. “But I said to you that you have seen Me, and yet do not believe. 37. “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. 38. “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. 39. “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. 40. “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.”

John 10:28-29

27. “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; 28. and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. 29. “My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father’s hand.

Christ is actually affirming the one who overcomes. To say that I will not erase you, is not to say that I will erase others. He is not addressing the one who does not overcome, but rather the one who does. In other words all the remnant will be saved. Those who are not of the remnant, however, looks just like the remnant, they will not be saved because they are not of Him. “They held to a form of godliness, but denied Him in their hearts” (2 Tim. 5).

Application:

The process found in the indictment is also the application for today.

- a. Wake up
- b. Strengthen
- c. Remember – what you have **receive** and **heard**
- d. Keep it
- e. Repent