

EFC

April 7, 2024

“Reputation or Reality?”

Revelation 3:1-6

Good morning, EFC. My name is Jeremy, and I'm one of the Pastors here. This morning, we pick back up in the book of Revelation. We've been considering the letters Jesus sent to seven churches of Asia Minor, and so far, we've looked at the first three. Jesus calls these churches, along with all of Christ's church throughout all history, to uncompromising and persevering commitment to Himself, even in the face of persecution and temptation. I'm going to go out of order and skip to the fifth letter this week since our children are with us today, because of the content (sexual immorality) of the fourth letter, which I'll cover next week.

Pray.

A gift for a child.

You know, not everything is as it seems in life, just like that box didn't contain what it advertised on the outside.

Far more serious – sometimes churches have the reputation of being alive, but they are actually dead.

The church in Sardis was one such church. It had a reputation of being alive, but it was dead. Kind of like the city itself – once a great city, it had faded in significance and prestige, and likely lived somewhat on its former reputation.

"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. 'I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and 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. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'" (Revelation 3:1-6)

What is the difference between a truly alive church, and one that only appears to be alive?

Three insights we gain from the church in Sardis:

First, we know a church is dead when its good works are lacking, for they are not done out of love and worship for God. Jesus told this church that their works were judged lacking in God's sight. In fact, the only “work” he mentions (“I know your works”) isn't even a work at all; it is their façade, their false reputation of being alive.

This is what God criticized Israel for through the prophet Isaiah:

“...this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men....” (Isaiah 29:13) A dead church may do so called good works, but they are not motivated by love for God and the glory of His name.

This is Sunday morning sainthood, but living like the devil the rest of the week. This is holiday Christianity. This is acting differently around your Christian friends because you want them to think highly of you, while it has nothing to do with honoring God. More sinister, this is living “for God” when your goal is really what you can get out of it.

But God is worthy of so much more than empty religiosity. Remember what we talked about last week: remember all God has done for our salvation, all He has done for us in Christ, all He has promised to continue to do to watch over us. God is worthy to receive all glory and honor, our highest delight and devotion, our adoration and love and joyful obedience, and our undying trust. He is worthy! But the dead church is dead to Him, and her works are not for His glory.

Second, Sardis shows us that the dead church is not vigilant to know and faithfully keep God’s Word against the invasive lies of the world around.

Two times Jesus speaks of the urgent need for this church to wake up, to be on alert.

Sardis’s history – 1500 ft (480m) cliffs on three sides. Thought no enemy could get in, so they were lazy and only guarded the front gate. But two times, enemy soldiers scaled the heights and opened the gates to their loss, all because they were not vigilant to keep watch.

This church was not vigilantly guarding against the lies and sinful practices of the culture around, and now they had become soiled with the sins of the world. This is Christ’s church, for whom He had died on the cross – and rather than remaining holy to Him, they wandered away into faithless living. Like a spouse who cheats on his wife, though she has given him everything – heart, mind and body, this church has betrayed Christ. They did not “remember” what they had received and heard: the Good News of forgiveness of sins and new life by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and rose again to purchase them for God. They have not been vigilant to guard their dedication to God’s Word against the lies of the world, and the lies have killed them.

Not long ago I watched a church service online. I was bothered when I realized the Bible wasn’t even opened during the message. I am concerned for this Pastor, and for his church. If they do not stand vigilant on God’s Word, they will die.

Finally, Sardis shows us that a dead church does not live unashamedly for Jesus Christ.

This letter doesn’t say a single word about persecution facing this church (unlike most of the other churches Jesus speaks to). They had become so like the culture around them, that they received no persecution, for there was nothing notably different, and therefore nothing to persecute.

But true Christians, Christ's true church, is radically different than the world – and the world takes note and is not happy. In John 15:18-20 Jesus told His disciples,

"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 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. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours."

A church that is not offensive to the sinful world around is no longer salty, no longer shining; it is dead.

"For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels." (Luke 9:26)

A church is dead when it only does good works that will be popular amongst their neighbors. A church is dead or dying when it is unwilling to say that God is holy, we are all wicked sinners apart from His grace, and Jesus is the only way to God.

When a church is ashamed of Jesus and the clear Gospel message, that church is dead.

Foundationally, the dead church is the church that has neither Christ nor the Holy Spirit.

John 6:63 "It is the Spirit who gives life...." John 15:5 "Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

It doesn't matter how big a church is, or how impressive their programs are, or how much money they have, or how popular they may be; a church whose works are not driven by worship of God, vigilantly committed to God's Word against the lies of the world, and ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a dead church.

And God sees the truth; always. Jesus is the one who holds the seven spirits (the Holy Spirit) who, in Revelation, sees all. Jesus is not fooled by appearances and reputations. God sees, and He is the perfect judge of all He sees. Do not think for a moment that we can fool God.

We need to consider all we've talked about this morning on three levels.

We need to consider this for our own church.

It may be impressive that we attend a church founded by missionaries about 90 years ago, made up of people from all over the world; but when we walk in that door on a Sunday morning, are we hungry for God?

Are we committed to God's Word – to know it, teach it, obey it, and vigilant to protect ourselves against lies?

Are we hungry for God's glory – amongst us, around us, and to the ends of the earth? To the point that we are joyfully willing to pay any price if it means others might know the good news of the love of God in Jesus?

We need to consider this for any church we may attend someday.

Some of you are only here in Ecuador for a limited time – when you go, how will you decide what church to be a part of? Let it be a living church, that loves Christ wholeheartedly, that is built upon the Word of God and vigilant against the lies of the world, and that is unashamed of the Good news that Jesus saves sinners and is the only hope for a dying world.

We need to consider this for our own individual lives as well, for we are the people who make up Christ's church.

Note that Jesus reprimands the church, but He also sees the individuals in it. And He is not unfaithful to those who trust Him and persevere. Even if you feel like you are the only one standing, stand with Jesus. The rewards are great and eternal, and the cost is fleeting.

Or if, as you listen today, you know you've been playing with God. Your works are not done out of love; you have allowed the lies and the sins of the world to take over your life; you have been ashamed of Jesus, unwilling to speak or show Him to the people around you. You are not fooling God, even if you think you're fooling the people around you. Jesus's call is to repent; confess your sins, for He is gracious. Ask Him to send His Holy Spirit to work in you, so that you might have fullness of life in God's Son, Jesus Christ. Don't wait until it's too late; He's calling you today, to follow Him in truth.