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WHAT JESUS THINKS OF HIS CHURCH

Series 5 – Sardis – Alive but Dead.

Scripture Reading – Revelation 3:1-6.

Introduction

The letter to the church at Sardis, the shortest of the seven letters, is without doubt a wake up call to any Body of believers who have lost the life of the Spirit of God. Sardis had forfeited something of great value. The words of Jesus to her are serious, "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive but you are dead. Wake up!! The power and the relevance of these words lie in the one who spoke them.

Now this church was situated in the city of Sardis, a city which had cut a niche for herself in the annals of history. The city had been the ancient capital of the Kingdom of Lydia. The greatest of her kings was Croesus who enjoyed extreme wealth. His wealth was such that his name is immortalized in the proverb, "As rich as Croesus." The first coins that were ever minted, were minted at Sardis in the days of Croesus. These coins, it is said, were the beginning of money in the modern sense of the term. And it would be true to say that it was the place where modern money was born. Scholars tell us that the city of Sardis was at the converging point of five different roads. It had become the world's greatest

trading center and was still wealthy at the time of the writing of this letter. However decay had set in, and it was said that even on pagan lips, the word Sardis had become a name of contempt. Its people were notoriously loose living, obsessively pleasure seeking and indulgently luxury loving. Sardis had become a city of decadence. It had lost its former power, splendor and glory. Even in the secular sense, Sardis the city that had once lived was now dead. All that the citizens of the city could do was to wistfully and longingly reflect on the splendor and glory of the past. It is clear that what was true of the city was also true of the church. It had a name or a reputation that she lived when in fact she was dead. This was the problem that Jesus had with the church at Sardis. What the Spirit said to this church was simply this, "you have a name that you live, but the reality is that you are dead." The warning is unmistakable, "Beware of a nominal Christianity." (Stewart P.187). You have the trappings of Christianity. You have the organization, the church machinery but no life. You have a lot of activity but no reality. What was it then that disturbed the heart of Jesus? His comments are an indication of what was troubling Him. The first thing on which He commented was her,

1. HER REPUTATION. Revelation 3:1.

Jesus said "I know your deeds, you have a reputation of being alive but you are dead." "You have a reputation" that was the human perception and assessment of the church, which was deficient. "But you are dead." that was the Divine knowledge, perception and the Divine revelation of the church. It is only God who can make that judgment. Sardis was dead; that was reality for it was the evaluation of Jesus. Now when He made this evaluation, He highlighted two truths. He commented on,

a. What was Apparent. Revelation 3:1. "You have a reputation....." It was a positive reputation, because the reputation was that they were alive. "You have a reputation....." but that is all that it is, a reputation! A name! While this was the most severe letter written to all of the churches, Sardis was not plagued by heresy or false teaching. There were no internal differences about truth.

Furthermore there was no evidence that they were under the pressure of persecution. She was not suffering slander of the Jewish leaders. Far and wide she had a reputation that she was alive. She gave the impression that she was a dynamically charged and spiritually energized. That was the name she had among the seven churches. The spectator might of thought that strong activity in the church was the same as vibrant life. Man is impressed by busyness and organization, but God is impressed by truth and reality. The Psalmist tells us the God desires truth in the inward parts. God sees more than activity. He is aware of reality or lack of it. What is clear is that He is deeply concerned with that

b. Which is Actual. Revelation 3:1. "I know your deeds.....I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of God. You have a reputation that you are alive but you are dead." The fine reputation of which the church boasted at Sardis was with man not with God. The Son of God was unimpressed by the status Sardis enjoyed with the other six churches. It was noted for its spirituality. It was renowned for its vitality. But the Son of God who knows all things – who sees the deepest recesses of the hearts says to His church you have a reputation that you are alive but you are dead. He passed by the apparent signs of life to what the actual condition of the church was. The signs of life were there, services maintained, maybe the numbers were increasing, there was feverish activity, public respect, possibly charity to the poor. But Jesus seems to ignore all of this with a simple nod of approval for these things that are good as far as they go. He moves beyond these things to the test of vitality, the criterion of spiritual life and energy. The deeds were there and Jesus knew it but in the case of Sardis they were not fruit of spiritual life. They were fruit of human activity. They were busy about many things but neglecting the main thing of all. The church had built its reputation with men but not with God. Consequently the judgment of the Son of God was they had a reputation that she was alive but was dead. There are two truths which are implicit here.

i. Sardis was living in the glow of her former glory. Revelation 3:1. She lived in the memories of the past. She rested on the name she had acquired. She

enjoyed the reputation that had been built by others. She reveled in past successes. She borrowed on previous experience of God. She had a name but only a name that she was alive. It was a reputation not based reality. Apparently alive but actually dead. She was living in the glow of a former glory. One of the subtle dangers that the church or the Christian faces is that they tend live on the memories of the past and do not give much attention to the condition of the present. What is of critical importance is not what the church was or what the Christian used to be, but what is the spiritual state of the church or the child of God now? Reliance on the spiritual fire and passion of the past does not suffice for today, and inspires no hope for the future and has no impact on souls. Warming your hands on past fires does not do it. The church at Sardis lived in the glow of its former glory. It was a church over which the ichabod could written the "glory had departed." You have a reputation of being alive but you are dead. Secondly the church at Sardis

ii. The Church at Sardis lived hidden behind the facade of spiritual vitality and energy. Revelation 3:1. Everything connected with the church appeared to be meticulously carried out, hence the fine reputation she had as being a church that was alive. It serves to remind us that we need to consistently sensitive, alert and aware that there can arise a difference between outward appearance and inward reality. It is easier to retain the outward appearance of an outward form of religion, than maintain inward energy and dynamic of the Spirit. This was the deep concern of the prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others. One has pointed out that the prophets were at pains to teach this distinction to Israel and Judah. The courts of the Temple and the precincts of the high places teemed with dutiful worshippers. Incense and sacrifices and noise of melody were being offered to God with punctilious devotion. But as the Lord Himself said through the prophet Isaiah: "This people draw near with their mouth, and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me." Isaiah 29: 13. They were alive but dead. Like the Pharisees they made clean the outside of the cup, they prayed on street corners with a strict adherence to the law. "They appear to people as

righteous but on the inside they are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." Matthew 23:25-27. It is clear that young Timothy had faced the same problem for Paul wrote to him in the words of J.B. Phillips they maintain a "façade of religion." Or as Moffet would say "Though they keep up a form of religion they will have nothing to do with it as force." They have a form of Godliness but deny its power." There was form but no force. There was style but no substance. It has become clear that the modern church is beset and bound by busyness. Never has there been so much noise and loudness in it, but it is not necessarily life. We can sing the singapated choruses with enthusiasm and feel elated and while they may have their place, they are not necessarily indicative of spiritual life. We can sing the worship songs and be visibly and inwardly moved emotionally, and that too has some validity, but it may not necessarily be spiritual dynamic. There maybe emotional power with no Divine power. The Holy Spirit is not worked up from within; He comes from above. The Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of life does not reside in these things, nor is he dependent on these things. The Holy Spirit is not an emotion; He is the third person of the Trinity. He is God Himself. The Holy Spirit is sent from the Father, to anoint, baptize and fill the church with life. He comes with power from on high. One Baptist Evangelist made an interesting observation on the church today when He wrote, "We are stirring up ourselves a plenty.....we have never had so many rousements." We may be able to stir ourselves, but it is only God the Holy Spirit who can bring spiritual life. Furthermore there is much showmanship in many congregations, but this is not indicative of life. The church can have all of these things and still be spiritually dead. As Havner pointed out "The blower is still blowing but the fire is out." There was activity but no evidence of the passion and life of the Spirit. This was the problem at Sardis. She was alive but dead. This is why Jesus spoke about the difference between their reputation and spiritual reality - between that which was apparent and that which was actual. The next comment that Jesus makes is concerning,

2. HIS REMEDY. Revelation 3:2-3.

The words of Jesus outline the steps needed to remedy the condition of the church. What He says in verses 2 and 3 make this clear. "Wake Up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds to be complete in the sight of God. Remember therefore what you have received and heard; obey it and repent!" The word complete in these verses means fulfilled or to fully satisfy. "I know your deeds and have not found them to have been fulfilled and they are not fully satisfied." John Stott comments that "these deeds were an empty shell with nobody to fulfill them. They were a routine of duties but they did not fulfill God's purpose or pattern." The name or reputation that Sardis had acquired was with men and not with God. It was before 'My God' that Jesus said He had found their works deficient. The works seemed to be solid and worthy to onlookers, but in the sight of God were thoroughly lacking. Here is word that needs to be sounded in the Christian church today. While it is true that we have responsibilities to those about us, our chief responsibility is to God. We live for Him, for it is to Him that we will one day give an account. The deficiency in the church at Sardis was that they were spiritually dead; they had allowed themselves to be separated off from the energizing revitalizing empowering Spirit of God. It seemed that like Samson she did not realize that the Spirit of God had departed from her. You can drift into sin but not into spiritual life. In five crisp commands, Jesus lays down the remedy for this serious deficiency. **Awake! Strengthen what remains! Remember! Obey! And repent! In these five commands lies the remedy to spiritual death in the church.** The first command is to live in,

a. Readiness or alertness. Revelation 3:2. "Wake up! Be watchful! Be alert! Jesus knew that there were some in the church who did not suffer from complete spiritual decay. There was a godly remnant in the church in Sardis which was still alive. The command here is to spiritual vigilance – they were commanded to awake out of spiritual drowsiness, and arouse themselves out of spiritual lethargy. While Jesus ministered on earth He urged His followers to "watch and pray." This message was often on His lips "Be dressed" He said " and ready for

and keep your lamps burning.....it will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when He comes...You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him." That is why the Apostle Paul writing to the Christians at Rome does so with a driving urgency ".....the hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer than when you first believed (Romans 13:11) And so to the church at Sardis comes the command "wake up!.....for if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief and you will not know at what time I will come to you." This is Christ's command to readiness. Its also a call to,

b. Reinforcement. Revelation 3:3. Jesus exhorted them "Strengthen what remains and is about to die." Or as the New English Bible puts it "Put some strength into what is left which otherwise must die." In other words "the dying embers of spiritual life must be fanned into a flame before they go out." Re-enforce the little that is left of spiritual vitality in the church. Strengthen the little of spiritual dynamic that remains or you will find yourselves lying in the wastelands of a spiritual desert. This is also a call to,

c. Reflection. Revelation 3:3. "Remember what you have received and heard." The word remember in this context means to "bear in mind" rather than to simply recall something. It is in the present imperative which expresses continuous action and as Barclay tells us that it means to go on remembering: don't let yourself ever forget. Faith was something they had received. The Word received is in the perfect tense, and means something which they had received and of which they had possession. Dr Barclay reminds us that the "Christian faith is a trust which has been given to us. Over and over again in the Pastoral Epistles we get the idea of the Christian faith as a deposit, like a deposit in the bank. It is truth that has been given to the church for safe-keeping. It is that spiritual dynamic, that spiritual life, that spiritual energy and spiritual truth which has been given to the church for to guard. The Christian faith is the word of God, the Gospel of Christ. While this is part of what is meant it is not the total meaning. John Stott points out, and I believe he is right,(P. 94) that "sound doctrine alone

cannot reclaim the church from death." Orthodoxy, while important, can sometimes itself be dead. The church at Sardis had received more than the gospel. They had received the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of the early New Testament church's ministry, Jesus, before His return to heaven, had told His disciples to wait for the promise of the Father who is the Holy Spirit until they had been filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter told the crowd on the day of Pentecost that if they repented and were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin, they would receive the Holy Spirit. The theme of the Holy Spirit dominated the early church. In the thinking and experience of the New Testament church the Holy Spirit was not considered to be an option. His presence was not considered to be abnormal or for special individuals. He was the very heart and life of the Body of Christ. Jesus says to the church at Sardis "remember what you have received and heard." Remember when you received the Holy Spirit for it is the Holy Spirit who can breathe the breathe of life, power and energy into the church. If the church is dead then we must recall what we received and heard. But recollection by itself is not enough. What is important is the reality of His presence in the heart and so there must also be,

d. A Response. Revelation 3:3. Jesus made this clear "That which you have heard and that which you have received OBEY!" Respond to it with active and implicit obedience. We lose the life of the Spirit in the church and in our lives when we disobey God. The key word is the word OBEY! It is better than sacrifice. It goes beyond service. It is more important than giving. "That which you have received and heard, OBEY! This is the key response to revival and the renewal of life in the church. The final command that Jesus gives is,

e. Repent. Revelation 3:3. "What you have received and heard obey and repent..." Jesus is not directing His words to the world but to the church. He calls the church to repentance. The word repent is in the aorist imperative tense and it describes definite action. It pinpoints a definite moment when we renounce sin and turn our backs on it to walk with Christ. So here are the commands of Jesus. His directives are to Readiness! Reinforcement! Reflection!

Obedient Response! and Repentance! These are the steps to the renewal of spiritual life. Finally the word that the Lord Jesus Christ has concerning the church is

3. RELIABILITY. Revelation 3:4-5

Jesus in verses 4-5 brings to our attention three truths about the reliability and the redemption of the church at Sardis. The first is,

a. Loyalty. Revelation 3:4. These words clearly indicate that Jesus was aware of what the condition of the church was in Sardis. There was nothing hid from Him. He commended the loyalty of the few. He praises the faithfulness of the minority. They are in fact the true church. They are what is known as the remnant. While the church in Sardis was in the process of spiritual degeneration, decline and decay, there were a few who remained faithful and loyal to the Lord Jesus Christ. The second thought that Jesus brought to the attention of the church at Sardis, and was indeed the heart of their reliability, that being,

b. Purity. Revelation 3:4. Jesus said "you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes." In other words there are those who have polluted or stained their souls. The Lord makes clear that these few "will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy." White stands for purity. White is the color of heaven. It is the color of the Kingdom of God. White represents the quality of holiness. In the Book of the Revelation there are references to a white stone! White cloud! White horses! White garments! and a great white throne." White or purity of life is the chief characteristic of the genuine child of God and graces the halls of heaven. Moffet tells us there is indication that in Asia Minor, dirty clothing was held in dishonor by pagan gods, so that those who wore soiled garments were barred from worshipping, if this was true for pagan gods how much more for the God of creation who is thrice holy. The Psalmist recognizing this asks "Who shall ascend to the hill of the Lord? He that has clean hands and a pure heart." Once again Jesus brings to the attention of the church the priority of purity of heart and holiness of life. "You have a few people in Sardis who not soiled their clothes. The language is couched in metaphoric language. Soiled clothes

represent the heart and life soiled by sin. He is focusing our attention on the need for holiness of life in the Body of Christ that is why He was drawn by the fact that there were those who not soiled their souls with sin. That is what caught the attention of the Son of God. It was something He considered to be of great significance. Purity is indispensable to the witness of the church and to the glory of God. Holiness is His passion and His glory. It is a priority with God. He will take the church no further in growth of holy character and committed service until this issue has been settled in the life of the church(Christian) Jesus prayed for this to take place in the life of His disciples in John 17:17 Father "sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." Jesus made clear that "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." Matthew 5:8. Paul joins the chorus of New Testament voices when he wrote "It is God's will that you should be holy....For God did not call you to be impure but to live a holy life." 1 Thessalonians 4:7. Then he goes on into chapter 5 verses 26-28 to pray, "May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and will do it." The writer to the Hebrews 13:12 writes about the power and the provision of the Cross to make us holy. Jesus died "outside the gate in order to make the people holy through His blood." Jesus said with satisfaction there were some in the Sardis church "who had not soiled their clothes." In these words He is not only commending them, He reveals what He considers to be an important priority in His church. The final mark of the churches reliability, which was also the reward for their reliability, is;

c. Security. Revelation 3:4-5. Those who are clothed in white "will walk with me for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. "I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and His angels." Those who are dressed in white will be assured of a life in heaven forever. They are the ones who in Revelation 7:14 have "washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb." There are two truths that strike me in Revelation 3:5.

i. Their names were written in the Book of Life.

ii. Their names will never be erased from the book of life if they walk in the victory and power of holiness. The security and assurance of heaven is conditioned upon the one soul who keeps His clothes unsoiled and pure in this life.

Leon Morris would caution us by pointing out that this does not mean to say they have merited salvation and "sanctification but rather that they have done nothing to forfeit it." You see "my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Blood and righteousness." This is as sure foundation upon which to ground your life. Let us insure that we do not forfeit this hope and security by sinful disobedience.

Conclusion

Jesus said to the church at Sardis you have a reputation that you are alive but you are dead. She was the church of the "living dead." (Barclay). Superficially all indications were that it was a thriving church. But inwardly the slow decay of the years had resulted in an inward lifelessness. While it was busy and energetic and while the gifts were being utilized, while they enjoyed their reputation with men, Jesus lamented over His lifeless church. One of the greatest dangers in the church is that the Christian can have the outward form of Godliness, but deny its power. It is then that our testimony becomes a farce not a force – duty not devotion – Pretense not power. The motions are there but that is all that is happening. There was once life, energy and joy in our walk with God, but somehow the glow has gone. "The blower is working but the furnace has gone out." You have a reputation that you are alive, but you know and you alone that you are inwardly life less. It is inward sin that brings about death in the soul and is only the Holy Spirit can cleanse and fill us with reality, power so that genuineness and reality are restored. If as you search your heart you know that you profession of faith is simply a reputation and not reality, why would you want to continue to live to live in that paralyzed spiritual condition. The hymn writer wrote well;

O Breathe of life come sweeping through us,
Revive thy church with life and power.

O Breathe of life come cleanse, renew us
And fit thy church to meet this hour."

