

The Church With a Deceptive Reputation

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Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 00] Good. We turn now to God's Word and to Revelation and chapter 3. We're working through these letters to the seven churches at the beginning of Revelation.

And this is number 5, the letter of the church in Sardis. Has someone got a page number for the blue Bible?

1029 if you're using one of the church visitor Bibles. Revelation chapter 3 verse 1. 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.

[1 : 20] 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 him before my father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Amen. May God bless his words this evening. Good.

Well, please do turn back to Revelation chapter 3, and we'll think about this. Lest the church in Sardis. A church can enjoy great acclaim, have an excellent reputation, but in reality, be a dead church.

[2 : 32] It's possible for something or someone to have all the outward signs of life, but the reality within is a quite different story.

Take a very trivial example. Imagine there's a lovely 1950s Mercedes-Benz. Beautiful to look at. The interior is lovely. But the owner has neglected entirely the engine, which has rusted away to uselessness.

The car won't move. It looks great, but in reality, it can't go anywhere. Take a more serious example. Take Lance Armstrong.

I remember a time back in my student days when Lance Armstrong could not have had a higher reputation. The astonishing comeback from cancer. Seven Tour de France victories.

Major charitable works. Super reputation. But in reality, tragedy was bubbling below the surface. All his success was fueled by the most sophisticated drug doping program ever seen in sport.

[3 : 37] There's a great mismatch, isn't there, sometimes, between an external reputation, the external signs of life, and the internal realities of death.

Such was the situation in Sardis. The church in Sardis enjoyed a great reputation. But the reality was that he was dead. Or at least almost dead.

The difference between Lance Armstrong and the church in Sardis is that Lance knew the reality, didn't he? He knew it was all a farce. He knew that it was all cheating.

He knew the reality and the reputation were at odds. They weren't real. I'm not sure the church in Sardis thought the reputation was in any way misleading until they got this letter.

They, as well as those around them, thought they were very much alive. They did not see Jesus' assessment coming. It is a devastating letter, isn't it?

[4 : 44] You can imagine the Christian community there in Sardis waiting for the letter to come. They've heard it's on its way. It's already been in Ephesus. They were a church strong on doctrine

but weak on devotion.

It's been to Smyrna. They're having a very tough time, great persecution, more to come. Pergamum and Thyatira have had their letters. No surprises there. False teaching needed tackles. You can imagine as they sit there hearing these letters being read out. Theirs is next. I wonder what the Lord Jesus will say to us, they say. It's bound to be good stuff, isn't it? We enjoy a stellar reputation after all.

And then the letter is read out. You can almost visualize jaws being picked up from the floor once this letter is finished being read out. But the words of the risen Lord Jesus see through all the pretense, through the outward show.

They see the reality. He saw the church in Sardis as it really was. He sees every church for what it really is. He sees this church for what it really is.

[5 : 57] And the opinions of men, no matter how good they might be, are ultimately irrelevant and inconsequential if those opinions do not align with the Lord Jesus' assessment of a church.

It shouldn't really matter what others think about a church. Our reputation matters not a jot if the Lord Jesus thinks we're dead. And that's certainly what he thought of the church in Sardis.

Jesus says, you have the reputation of being alive, verse 2. But you're dead.

Can you imagine the church there in Sardis? They were probably expecting a long list of encouragements and commendations, weren't they? I know your works, begins the Lord Jesus. Here we go, they thought. Here comes the pat on the back. You have the reputation of being alive. Yes, we do. Yes, we do. We've got a great reputation. How is Jesus going to build on that, they thought.

[6 : 59] Well, here it comes. But you're dead. Jesus saw the reality. And he sees that despite enjoying an excellent reputation, the church was, in fact, dead.

And he tells them this. So that they would revive. So that they would return to him. And once again, be a living church.

There was hope for the church in Sardis. There were a few, verse 4, who were not like that. There were a few who were alive. And there was great hope for this church.

As they repent, they will know life. That is why the Lord Jesus writes these words to this church. So that they would turn, repent, and live. So let's look at this passage then and ask three questions. What does an almost dead church look like? Question two, how does a church die? And question three, is there hope for an almost dead church?

[8 : 06] I say almost because there's hope of revival. They're not quite fully finished yet. So question one, what does an almost dead church look like? It's clear, isn't it, that a church's reputation may not match the reality in Christ's sight.

So what does an almost dead church look like? Well, first, it doesn't look like a dead church. In fact, it may enjoy a fine reputation.

The church in Sardis, to your average observer, seemed to be flourishing. It had the reputation of being alive. If you were along at the West of Asia Gospel Partnership gatherings, it was the church that everyone was talking about.

Do you see what Sardis is doing? They're doing this new program. They're really going great. Great reputation. They were free of persecution and internal troubles. It was full of activity and vitality. Well, at least so it seemed. Their real state was not obvious to onlookers. You see, it's perfectly possible to look very much alive and yet be spiritually dead.

[9 : 25] It's possible to have a church packed with events in the calendar, lots of activity, lots of groups, lots of excitement and signs of life, the sorts of things that garner a good reputation, and yet be spiritually dead.

It's very sobering, isn't it? It's a stark warning. And it should cause us, as a church, as individuals, if we have any degree of self-awareness, to ask uncomfortable questions about ourselves.

Could we, in reality, be spiritually dead or almost dead? This building is used almost every hour of the day, six days a week.

Lots of activity. Things that in some quarters would garner a very good reputation. But having a good reputation is of no value whatsoever if the Lord's estimation of us is the opposite.

And that was certainly the case in Sardis. While their works may have been spiritually impressive to men, in God's sight, they were empty of substance. The church was all name, no reality, all reputation, and no life.

[10:42] An almost dead church can look to many people to be very much alive. A good reputation amongst men is no guarantee that the reality, as determined by the risen Lord Jesus, is healthy.

A good reputation is no guarantee of life. But the opposite is also true, isn't it? Having a bad reputation amongst men is not necessarily a sign that you're dead.

In fact, a poor reputation amongst men may well be because you're very much alive in the sight of the one whose opinion really matters, who counts for anything. That's not to say that we do everything we can to get a bad reputation.

Of course not. We do things to the best of our ability. We do so with God's agenda, his priorities as the driving force, not man's opinions. And in fact, directing the life of church according to God's plans and his priorities won't often lead to a good reputation, will it?

Just read the book of Acts. Time and time again, opposition, conflict, difficulty. So beware a church with a good reputation amongst men.

[12:02] It guarantees nothing. It may be a sign of real life, but there's no guarantee of it. And beware seeking a good reputation amongst men as well.

It's not their opinion that matters. So what does a dead church look like? Well, that's the first thing. It doesn't look like a dead church.

In fact, it enjoys a fine reputation. But secondly, what does a dead church look like? Its second point, its works are incomplete.

There is a fatal reality. The risen Lord Jesus gives the definitive assessment on the church in Sardis. It's not alive, as everyone else seems to think, but rather it's dead.

And Jesus, in the second half of verse 2, has not found their works complete in the sight of God. Now, what does that mean? What does it mean that their works are not complete?

[13:03] Well, that word complete is used elsewhere by the Apostle John to mean full. So their works, you could say, are not full in the sight of God. So although their activity and all their doing seemed to people around them to be impressive, in God's sight, all that activity was empty.

Things were done without much thought for God, not done for him, but rather perhaps for garnering a good reputation with men. How tempting is that?

How often do you or I pause for a moment and ask, am I doing this for the Lord and his name, or am I doing it so that others will think that I'm impressive?

I'm not that all the time. I don't know about you. It's a good question to ask of any activity of a church, isn't it? Why are we doing this? What's the real driving force behind this activity or that?

And the reality is hard to discern, isn't it? At least for us. We can always see into the hearts of men and what we're doing, but not so for Jesus. He saw the reality. He saw through the good reputation.

[14:19] But we only see what people present. It's not easy to discern a dead church which on the surface looks so vibrant. And so we must ask the Lord Jesus to reveal to us the true spiritual state of our church, of our own hearts.

Ask him. Show us. So we must ask, what does the Lord think of us? Not what do other men think. What is the reality?

Forget about our reputation amongst men. It may or may not be right. So what does an almost dead church look like? Well, rather startlingly, it can look absolutely fine.

In fact, more than fine, it can seem to be a thriving church. And so the implication for us is don't be lulled into a false sense of thinking things are okay because we have a good reputation.

Don't fall for that. Don't be satisfied with a good reputation amongst others if the inner reality is absent. Rather, we ask, what is the Lord Jesus' assessment?

[15:30] What does he think? Does he see our works and conclude that they're complete? Not done to perfection. We can't do that.

But rather, are our works done out of a heart of love and service for him? Done out of loyalty to him? Done wholeheartedly? That's what he's looking for.

So what does a dead church look like? Well, it can look absolutely fine. There can be a very deceptive reputation. There can be a fatal reality.

Let's move on to our second question. How does a church begin to die? Why? Well, a church dies through complacency and through focusing on the wrong things.

Complacency? The church in Sardis seems to have fallen asleep. They've got lazy with sin. And they focus on the wrong things. They've done things that have garnered a good reputation amongst man, but not amongst the Lord.

[16:43] Now, the Lord Jesus seems to mix his metaphors here a bit, doesn't he? He says they're dead, but then he tells them to wake up. It's a church well on the way to dying.

In fact, it's fast asleep and it needs rousing. Two things to say here. Two ways in which a church begins to die. First is complacency. I heard someone saying recently that all churches naturally go to sleep unless they're continually rousing themselves.

And that's true, isn't it? That is the way we naturally tend, both individually as Christians, but also corporately, together as a church. We tend towards drifting away, of course, falling asleep.

And that certainly seems to be the case in Sardis. Once they really were alive. Notice that Jesus calls them to remember what they once received. They used to be alive.

Something of value still remains. So it wouldn't be right to say that the church in Sardis had always been like this. But over time, it's drifted into a long and comfortable slumber.

[18:00] However, churches need to be constantly shaken up. And perhaps this is exactly the word that we need to hear this evening, the message we as a church need to hear this evening.

Well, there's no perhaps about it. This is the living and reigning Lord Jesus. It's his word to us this evening. And we better listen, hadn't we? Perhaps he is saying to us, to you, you've fallen asleep. Wake up. Is he saying to us, you've become complacent, Tron Church? Don't forget what you're all about. Don't forget what you're here for.

Lamp stand shining in the midst of a dark world. You're here to witness and testify to the risen Lord Jesus. That's our task. It's too easy to rely on our good reputation.

That's been built up over many years, many decades. And here's the frightening thing. I think it's true to say that a church can fall asleep long before its reputation begins to erode.

[19:10] Fall asleep. And the reputation remains untouched for years. And that was certainly the case with Sardis. It was asleep. The Lord Jesus says, you're dead.

Wake up. But its reputation was unscathed. It enjoyed a good reputation. A reputation of being alive. Everyone thought it was a brilliant church.

But in reality, it was asleep. A church can fall asleep long before its reputation begins to erode.

So please don't place your confidence in whatever sort of reputation we may have as a church.

Reputations can be very misleading and not reflect of the reality.

So beware complacency. It is the road to death for a church. That's the first way a church begins to die.

[20:12] Second, is a focus on the wrong priorities. The church in Sardis had focused on external activity rather than inner spiritual growth.

It had consciously or unconsciously done things that won the praise of men without the inner reality. They did things that got them a good reputation.

But the Lord Jesus saw the reality and it was dead. They had the outer deeds without the inner reality. There are many things a church can do that will win the applause of the watching world.

That will get a good reputation. Things that the world around expects a church to do. Endless social justice projects. Doing good deeds.

The world around will love that. Those things will win you a good reputation in the world's eyes. Just don't mention Jesus or mention objective truth and you'll be fine.

[21:16] That will get you a good reputation. There are many things that a church can do that will win the applause of the evangelical community. Lots of activity. Big events that draw a crowd.

I'm not saying that those things in and of themselves are wrong. But these things can go on without the inner reality. Without a real relationship with our Lord. Real dependence upon him.

Real desire to please and serve him. Those things are nice to do because, well, they win plauders.

We get praise from men. Who doesn't enjoy that? There are many things we can do within the church that will give the appearance of progress.

But in actual fact, there's nothing really there. There are things we can focus on that look rather good. But that's about it. There's a book written by a couple of Australian chaps that's been around for almost a decade now, I think.

And quite a number of folk in the church and the leadership here have read it. And it's called The Trellis and the Vine. And the basic premise of that book is this. The aim is to have a nice, healthy, growing vine.

[22:32] But in order to facilitate that growth, you need a trellis, don't you, to support it, to keep it upright, to stop it from collapsing. You must have the trellis in place to allow the vine to grow.

Now, the main thing is not the trellis. Think about that, of course. You need to maintain it and from time to time change things. But the focus is on the growing vine.

And so, too, in a church. The focus in a church is growing the gospel through the preaching of the word, through people growing in love towards one another, in love and service of the Lord to each other and to those around us through evangelism.

That's what we're aiming at. But in order for that to happen, you need structures. You need the trellis. It can be very tempting to spend all your time constructing the ultimate trellis.

You can put together the most impressive looking organization. The sort of organization that will gain you a good reputation, an impressive reputation. But the vine work, the real work, has been neglected.

[23 : 44] In fact, the vine is almost dead. It can be easy for a church to forget what it's really about and for.

Easy to focus on impressive trellis activity. And to neglect the harder, often unseen, harder to quantify, vine work. People work.

Gospel work. Personally, I find that a great difficulty. It's the easiest thing to organize something impressive that people think is great. But there's actually nothing really going on.

So beware focusing on the wrong priorities. Two things, I think, here from the church inside us. Two things that can lead a church on the path to death.

Complacency and wrong priorities. Well, finally then, question three. Is there any hope for an almost dead church?

[24 : 46] Oh, yes. A church can be revived through repentance and obedience to the word they heard at first.

Clearly, there was hope for the church there in Sardis. Otherwise, why would the Lord Jesus speak these words to them? He speaks these words for a purpose, to bring them back, to revive them. And Jesus gives five imperatives to the church there. Beginning in verse 2, he says, Wake up. That comes in verse 2 and again in verse 3.

Wake up. Strengthen what remains. Remember what you received and heard. Keep it. Repent.

Repent. That's what the Lord Jesus urges the church to do.

And if they don't respond, then he promises to come like a thief in the night. If they do respond, then he will clothe them in white.

[25 : 51] Their names will never be blotted from the book of life. Jesus himself will confess their names before the Father in heaven. So two alternatives are set before the church.

Either death or life. And choose life. Jesus pleads to them and to all his church through all ages. Don't remain in your slumber. Don't die. Rather live. There is hope for a church in such a position. So what to do?

What does the church that's dying do? Well, we can summarize it in two points as we close. First, be watchful. That phrase, wake up, that comes in verse 2 and 3.

It could be translated as, be watchful. Wake up. And it was a phrase that would have rung many bells for the people there in Sardis.

[26 : 55] Sardis, the city, had what seemed to be an impregnable fortress set on a hilltop. It was set about 1,500 feet above the valley plain.

And on three sides were near vertical cliffs. Very impossible to attack. And so when the city was under attack, everyone would go up to the hilltop fortress and they'd be safe.

The ideal place to retreat to when under attack. No enemy could expect to get in. But twice in the 50s history, the hilltop fortress has been breached.

Once by Cyrus the Great of Persia, and then again by Alexander the Great's armies. And on both occasions, a small band of soldiers scaled the seemingly impassable cliff face while the watchmen slumbered.

That seems to have been repeated by the church. The watchmen had fallen asleep. Complacency had set in.

[27 : 56] Wake up. Be watchful. Attend to matters of real spiritual importance. Don't get sidetracked by all the trellis stuff. That needs to be there, yes.

But don't neglect the real vine work, the personal work, the gospel work. So we need to wake up, don't we, and be watchful to real spiritual matters.

Ask yourself, do we as a church love the Lord Jesus? Do we love him? Is there the internal reality of living faith?

Trust him, or is it just an outwards going through the motions? Are we really loving each other?

Helping each other to progress spiritually?

Do we have real concern for our lost friends, neighbors, and family members? Are we praying for them? Not just on an individual basis, but corporately as a church.

[28 : 56] Are we praying for them? Is the congregational prayer meeting on Wednesday something we commit to, because that is where we cry out together to the Lord, and ask him to be at work in and through our church, that he may bring many who are currently lost to life?

Or do we think things seem to trundle on pretty well here in church? It just happens. Lots going on. The reputation is strong. I'll not bother praying. Other people go to that.

Wake up! Be watchful. Be watchful. For seconds, and finally, repent.

We're to wake up. We're to be watchful. But secondly, we're to repent. The Lord Jesus says, Remember then what you received and heard.

Keep it and repent. This is a call to remember the gospel you heard at first and responded to. It's a call to hear the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ, the unchanging call of the gospel to repent and turn to him, to confess our sins in the sight of our holy God, to seek his forgiveness, to submit ourselves to his rule over our lives, to hear his word again and obey it.

[30 : 19] The Lord will not turn away all who call to him. It's all about faith. We don't merit it. We don't earn it. We cry out, Father, forgive.

That is the road to revival for a sleeping church that has almost died. It is what you and I, individually and corporately as a church, must always return to.

A repenting people a repenting church will not fall asleep. We won't fall asleep if we keep repenting, keep trusting him. A repenting church will be vital and alive in the sight of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that is what matters, isn't it? Our reputation amongst men is of no consequence, really. It may be good, it may not be good. But if it is a good reputation without the corresponding inner reality, then that is dangerous.

That was the situation in Sardis. Good reputation, they thought it was fine, but actually they were dead. And so we need to pray, don't we?

[31 : 35] We need to call out to the Lord that he would keep us from such self-deception, that he would, by the help of his Holy Spirit, keep us watchful, that he would keep us repentant.

And we need his help for that, don't we? So we ask for his help. Help us, Lord, to be a repentant, watchful people. That we would be a people whose names would never be blotted out from the book of life.

That Jesus would confess our names before the Father. He who has an ear, let him hear. what the Spirit says to the churches. Amen. Let me pray. Our Father, you see everything you see through the outward reality to the inward reality.

You see into each of our hearts, you see into the heart of this church. And Lord, we ask you that you would show us the reality. And Lord, that's sobering at times.

[32 : 52] But yours is a message without it's a message that doesn't condemn without hope. So, where you've put your finger on issues in our lives, individually as a church, would you would you help us to respond by repenting and trusting you that we wouldn't be a church with a good reputation without the inner reality.

Lord, help us to be a living church. Help us to be watchful and to be repentant. Help us so that we as a church may glorify your name, stand bright as witnesses to the truth.

Please help us to that end for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.