



I'm going to make an assumption here that the majority of people here have watched the movie *The Princess Bride*. And, if you haven't, don't worry. You'll still understand the point I'm going to try to make. In the movie, there's a character named Inigo. And there's a part in the movie where Inigo gives up hope. He's defeated by the man in the mask, and that causes Inigo to give himself over to alcohol. Then, Inigo's friend, Fezzik, searches for him. Fezzik finds him drunk in the town, and Fezzik wants to renew Inigo's hope. But first, he needs to sober him up. So, he dunks Inigo's head in and out of water, and then he forces soup in him and coffee in him until finally Inigo says *Enough!* He's sobered. It's only then that Fezzik can speak reality into him.

Inigo turned to alcohol to "comfort" him, but all it did was keep him from reality. And even though Inigo seemed happy and fine, he wasn't. He didn't know what was *real*. He needed to be sobered up.

Now, as I remind you of this scene from the movie, some of you might laugh thinking about it, but there are those of you here who have battled against alcoholism personally or with a loved one, and you know it's no joke. As with many alcoholics, they also think they're fine and they have things under control. But the people close to them know they aren't seeing reality. It's a very sad and pitiable state to be in. They need to be sobered up.

I share this with you because as I've read and re-read Revelation 3:1-6, I feel like it's a spiritual sobriety passage. With every other church up to this point, Jesus states what he judges as good and then what he judges as evil. Sardis has nothing good, and Jesus doesn't go into detail on the bad like he does the other churches. As I read this letter, I'm reminded of one of the most terrifying and sobering passages in the whole Bible, where Jesus says, "**Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.**"²² **On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?'**"²³ **Then I will announce to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you lawbreakers!'**¹

When was the last time you thought about this passage? Today's sermon is a similar message, and I hope that it truly sobers anyone up who is spiritually drunk. So, let's move forward, and I'll share the main idea of the sermon now: **Let's together reawaken to the power of Jesus (as opposed to resting in our reputation) and his promised cleansing, care and confession. "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches."**² Before we go further, take a few moments to pray the Lord would open your ears to the Spirit and respond accordingly.

Before we jump into the text, let's get a little helpful backdrop on the city of Sardis because some of its background plays into how Jesus speaks to the church there. As one person wrote, "The hill on which Sardis was built had smooth, nearly perpendicular rock walls on three sides. Only from the south could

¹ [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Mt 7:21–23.

² [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Re 3:6.

the city be approached, via a steep, difficult path. . . . Its seemingly impregnable location caused the inhabitants of Sardis to become overconfident. That complacency eventually led to the city's downfall. Through carelessness, the unimaginable happened: Sardis was conquered. . ." (Colin J. Hemer, *The Letter to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986], 133). Interestingly enough, the city of Sardis was conquered on two different occasions in BC 500's and BC 200's. In the BC 500's attack, it has been said that even a child could have prevented the attack. If they just had someone looking out, the people climbing the steep edge would have been stopped altogether. You'd think they would have learned their lesson the first time, but the almost impossible way to take the town must have made them think the first time was clearly a fluke. Yet, it was taken out again. Sardis' pride and trust in their own protections left them wide open to being overcome by their enemies.

By the time of the middle and late first century in which this letter of Revelation was written, Sardis was still a prosperous, but it's glory days were definitely over. Yet, Jesus speaks to the church in Sardis as if they're following in the steps of the city of Sardis – but their battle is a spiritual one. Will they listen to their King Jesus? Will we listen to our King Jesus?

Let anyone who has ears to hear *listen* to what the Spirit says to the churches.

1. Let's together reawaken to the power of Jesus (as opposed to resting in our reputation)

In order to understand the problem in Sardis, we have to first gaze at the vision Jesus gives of himself. As I said a couple weeks ago, every vision of Jesus specifically speaks to the issues in each church. So, what is the vision of Jesus here? In verse 1, we read, "Thus says the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. . ." ³ These are some confusing phrases, but I think we can rather quickly understand their meaning.

Jesus says **two things about himself**. First, **he has the seven spirits of God**. Who are the seven spirits of God? Well, actually the number 7 carries great significance throughout the Scripture as a symbol of fulfillment, completion, perfection. When John says the "seven spirits," I think the New Living Translation gets the idea correct as it says, "the sevenfold Spirit of God." ⁴ In other words, Jesus has the perfect Holy Spirit. This fits even with Zechariah 4 where the number 7 shows up and then the Lord speaks of his power by saying "not by might or power, but by my Spirit" will he accomplish his work.

Here, Jesus is the One who has the authority to send the Spirit. The Spirit who works the power of God in the lives of people. The Spirit whom Jesus said on the earth that he would send to guide people into all truth. The Spirit, whom Jesus said would convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. The Spirit by whom we can honor the Lord and live for God's glory in this world! Jesus has this perfect Spirit.

Second, **he has the seven stars**. This one is actually much easier to define. According to Revelation 1:20, they are the angels of the churches. But what does that mean? Could these be actual angels? Yes. Could this word "angel" be better translated as a messenger who is a representative for the church? Yes. Which one is it? I'm not entirely sure. But when you think of Jesus saying he *has* the seven stars. I think this phrase is talking about Jesus' authority. He knows each and every church. He's the Lord of these churches and they ought to listen to him. He leads them.

³ [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Re 3:1.

⁴ Tyndale House Publishers, [Holy Bible: New Living Translation](#) (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), Re 3:1.

So, think of these two phrases and combine them. Jesus has the Spirit and has sent the Spirit. And he has the churches. What each church needs is the Spirit, and if they are without the perfect and complete Spirit of God, the churches will die!

Do we understand this? Do you understand that apart from God the Spirit, anything you do is eternally worthless? I can't help but think that in my own life I can be tempted to think that there are some things I can do without God and then there are other things I need God for. I mean, we're brought up thinking that maturity means that we can do it on our own. While that may be true in many things in this physical, fallen world; that's never the case spiritually. Spiritual maturity is *not* saying to God, "Hey God, look! I don't need you for this anymore!" Spiritual maturity is saying, "Oh God, grant me more and more and more grace; and as I receive more grace, give me even more!" We are always needful for the Spirit. And this is what I believe Sardis lost.

I believe Sardis **rested in their reputation**, assuming they were faithful to Jesus because they had a good reputation. But Jesus says the following: I know your works; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. ² Be alert and strengthen what remains, which is about to die, for I have not found your works complete before my God.⁵

Years ago, I was told a statement that I know many others here are aware of. This statement came from a very godly woman, and she would say, "**You take care of your character. Let God take care of your reputation.**" By that, the emphasis is on your heart and your motives. Yet, I think many times, we're more focused on our reputation. I think we think that if our reputation is good that proves our character is good. If people think well of us, then clearly we must be doing something right, right?

The reputation of this church was one that appeared to have all the characteristics of life. This church seemed to be flourishing. This church seemed to have it all together. This church seemed to be mature. This church seemed to be on the side of God. Yet, Jesus says that they are dead and that their works are not complete before God. This sounds a lot like the apostle Paul's words to Timothy when he warned that there are people who have an appearance of godliness but deny its power (see 2 Tim. 3:5).

I recall a story that was spoken of by Donald Barnhouse in a sermon and broadcast nationwide on CBS radio about a century ago. "Barnhouse speculated that if Satan took over Philadelphia (the city where Barnhouse pastored), all of the bars would be closed, pornography banished, and pristine streets would be filled with tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The children would say, 'Yes, sir' and 'No ma'am,'" and the churches would be full every Sunday . . . where Christ is not preached." (quoted from the introduction of *Give them Grace* by Elyse Fitzpatrick, p. 11). While we know that this is not the case in every scenario that Satan works, we know that Satan does work this way. He loves superior moral behavior within the church as long as Jesus is not preached because it gives people a false sense of security. After all, we humans are tempted to think that if we have the reputation, then we must have the right heart.

I pray that we would not fall into this trap. Are you more concerned about your reputation than you are about your heart character? Let me just ask you two questions:

- 1) **Do you regularly commune with the Lord (i.e. – seek him and want him) in prayer and hearing the Word?**
- 2) **Do you talk about Jesus with both believers and unbelievers? In other words, are you making disciples and evangelizing?**

⁵ [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Re 3:1–2.

I ask these two questions for a very specific reason. To commune with/have a relationship with the Lord is *why* Jesus came to save people. In John 6:28-29, we read a conversation people had with Jesus: ²⁸ **“What can we do to perform the works of God?” they asked.** ²⁹ **Jesus replied, “This is the work of God—that you believe in the one he has sent.”** ⁶

What does that mean? The pristine streets, the moral behavior, the “yes, sirs,” and so on, do not matter if you are not living in relationship with the Lord. To believe in the one he has sent means that you trust and depend on him. You look to him. And yet, as I think about this and I think about my Savior’s words to Sardis, I’m burdened. I’ve had so many conversations over my 20+ years being a pastor where when I talk about relationship with God in prayer and the Word, they confess they don’t really have any of that. Some even say they don’t really even think about God in a given day. Does that sound like salvation to you? And, it’s no wonder that so many Christians don’t disciple and evangelize. They don’t really know Jesus themselves. Because I know this: If you know Jesus, you have to talk about Jesus! How much does the Jesus and his great commission course through your veins?

Are you resting in your reputation or resting in Jesus? Why do you do what you do? I pray we would not be content with a reputation. Our reputation will not save us. Only Jesus saves. I hope you hear the burden and desperation in my own soul because I’ve been gripped with the sobriety and pain of the church in Sardis. Maybe we need to be sobered up. I pray all of us would seriously consider the words of Jesus to the church in Sardis: you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Is that us? Is that me? Is that you? Remember Jesus’ words in Matthew 7 again. There will be *many* who are confused at the judgment. They will have done some pretty phenomenal works: prophesying, casting our demons and performing miracles. To top this off, they believe that they are doing this for Jesus’ glory. That’s why they keep saying, “in Your name.” Yet, Jesus’ response is that they are workers of lawlessness.

How can seemingly good works really be lawlessness? This is the same point brought out here in this text. They have a good reputation in at least the community if not Asia Minor itself. How can this be? Well, their works weren’t complete.

Now, you might be tempted to think that means they just needed to do a little bit more to please God. That’s not it. What does “sevenfold” mean? It refers to completion and perfection. So, what does that mean for Sardis not having complete works? It means they’ve been living in dependence on themselves and not on the Spirit. Remember the story I told a while back about Christians from another country visiting churches in America, and after a couple weeks they were asked what they thought of the American church? Their response was, “It’s amazing what the church can do without the Spirit.”

So, what does that mean? Well, apart from dependence on our Lord, it’s impossible to please him. And the Bible tells us we are to keep in step with the Spirit, pray in the Spirit, not quench the Spirit because we live by the Spirit. This is a relationship. So, let me ask you how you’re living as a Christian and as a church member? Are you practically living like spiritual maturity means you don’t need the Spirit? Or, are you communing with the Lord through Word and prayer more and more in your life? You won’t do this if you think you got this covered. And this takes us to the response Jesus calls us to:

2. Let’s together reawaken. . .to his promised cleansing, care and confession.

Let’s reread verses 2-5: ² Be alert and strengthen what remains, which is about to die, for I have not found your works complete before my God. ³ Remember, then, what you have received and heard; keep

⁶ [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Jn 6:28–29.

it, and repent. If you are not alert, I will come like a thief, and you have no idea at what hour I will come upon you.⁴ But you have a few people in Sardis who have not defiled their clothes, and they will walk with me in white, because they are worthy.⁵ “In the same way, the one who conquers will be dressed in white clothes, and I will never erase his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name before my Father and before his angels.”⁷

“Be alert, and strengthen what remains.” The phrase “be alert” can also be translated “Wake up.” In other words, “Look at yourselves! Don’t you see the spiritual death you’re in?” Or, to use the illustration I gave at the beginning, Get out of your drunkenness! Sober up and see reality. We as people are all too often prone to cover ourselves up and continually seek to make ourselves look better than we really are. And, I would not be surprised if there are people in this room who are doing that. Oh, please stop making excuses. Wake up. You’re dead and you’re playing a very dangerous game. I pray that this isn’t the case for the entire church, but if it is, then I say, “Wake up to all of us!”

Jesus then adds, “strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die.” The word “thing” is written in a way to denote that this is not referring to people, but instead it is referring to things. There are “things” in this church that have life in them, but they are ready to die away. That’s so intriguing to me. But what Jesus is saying is that there are means of grace that if the people would heed them, they’d find life. So, what are they?! The things is: **the Bible**. In verse three, we read, “Remember, then, what you have received and heard. . .” I find it interesting in the Greek that the word written here is not so much “what you have received,” but the word “how.” Some translations don’t keep the word “how” here, but I think it’s very important. If your translation says “what”, I recommend you make a note off to the side and write the word “how.” It’s a seemingly important difference because Jesus is saying, “In order to change, the church needs to remember how they received life in the beginning days.” *How* did the church receive grace from the Lord in the beginning? Well, I’m reminded of passages like Romans 10:17 says, “¹⁷ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ.”⁸ Where is the message of Christ perfectly preserved? The Word! The Word that is preached.

The Word is clearly still in the church of Sardis. Will they listen? This is the second element to *how* we receive: **faith**. We are told in these verses that there are some still in their midst who are faithful. They have faith. Which also means that a large number in the church do not have faith. However, for those who have faith, exercise it! The reality is that we shouldn’t just listen to a sermon and take pride that we can mentally assent to it. Galatians 3:2 asks a rhetorical question, “**Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?**”⁹ Will you listen to the Word and realize your need for the Lord?

Now, what do I mean by that? Well, I think about the Israelites in the Old Testament when they were reprimanded and told their works were lacking, and they would then say, “We’ll do better!” That’s like you listening to a sermon and just saying, “Ok, I’ll try harder. It’s only reputation work without the heart.” Like the Israelites, we’ll fail if we live this way. The right response is a response of faith – meaning, a response of saying, “Lord, my works are incomplete. Not only do I not do enough, but I also have not really been dependent on you. I’ve not been wanting a relationship with you. I come to you for rescue!” This is the right response because the message of Christ is, “Come to me, all who weary. . .and I will give you rest.” Have you been resting in your reputation? Turn to Christ! Listen to the Word. Receive by faith. Be reawakened! As we sang together today, “Come awake. Come awake. Come and rise up from the dead!” The Bible is one of the living things among us. The Spirit works his power through the Word of God! Will we listen and submit? The Word will sober us up and cause us to see reality. Do you want to see reality? Oh, how I hope so because Jesus warns those who refuse. He will come like a thief

⁷ [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Re 3:2–5.

⁸ [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Ro 10:17.

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ga 3:2.

in the night. This is not talking about a glorious rapturing where we will then be with him face-to-face in grace. This is a statement of judgment. Remember, Jesus knows your heart. He knows us! If we refuse, it doesn't matter what other people say of us and think about us. It doesn't matter what our reputation is. Jesus knows and he will judge.

Why would you choose your reputation over Jesus? Repent! The blessings to those who have faith are incomprehensibly wondrous.

Jesus' promised cleansing. This is one of the motivations to endure. While Sardis is a very sobering letter and can incite fear in us, it ends with the call for hope! This reminds me of the hymn *Amazing Grace*: "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved." This is how Jesus works especially in this letter. Now, Jesus speaks to those who have faith, calling them to live it out all the more because he will clothe them with white garments. And this is true of anyone who turns from their self-trust to trusting Jesus.

The imagery here is memorable. In an affluent town like Sardis where image meant a lot, to have defiled clothes would be utterly foolish in their culture. The same would be true in our culture, too. So, Jesus uses phraseology that means something to them. There are new, undefiled garments. This spoke of purity before God and spiritual faithfulness. Whoa! Get that! Even if they aren't morally perfect, but they are trusting the Lord and walking with him by faith, God counts that as righteousness. And anyone who trusts in Jesus – even if you've never turned to Jesus before – anyone who turns from their sinfulness and trusts Jesus is given white garments. You're made pure. Why? Because we know what Revelation (and the Bible) says elsewhere. Jesus himself took the punishment our sins deserved and he gives his righteousness as a gift to all who turn to him. So, we have pure clothes! But what if they get defiled again? Here's the second blessing.

Jesus' care. The second reward mentioned is that Jesus will keep God's children. He will never let them go. Now, this is a very interesting statement given that Jesus has just given a generalization of death on this church. How can there be unbelievers in this church? Were they once Christians and now they've lost salvation or were they never saved to begin with. I believe they were never saved to begin with. As I stated earlier, over time, people seeped into this church – not caring about the gospel message – but they loved the gathering. Maybe it was people who grew up in church and they just assumed their salvation. Maybe it was people who just wanted to be a part of something "bigger." Whatever it was, I don't believe they were saved to begin with. But for those who repent, they will be citizens of a much greater land. And, that citizenship provides eternal joy in the presence of God, its King.

And the final blessing is **Jesus' confession**. The final blessing Jesus adds for this church is that He will confess the name of the overcomer before the Father and before the angels. In Matthew 10:32, Jesus says, "'Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven.'"¹⁰ The point in Sardis was that they lost the gospel message. They lost Jesus. They were no longer preaching a unique message to the world. But what joy in returning to Jesus. And can you imagine the day you hear Jesus confessing you before God the Father? Imagine it now. Can you? You can hear your name coming out of the mouth of Jesus himself before the Father saying, "I know him! I saved him! He's works are complete because I gave him the Spirit and he depended on me." Then, we'll hear the Father say, "Enter into the joy of the Lord."

"Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches."¹¹

¹⁰ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Mt 10:32). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

¹¹ [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Re 3:6.