

REVELATION

Part 7: “To Sardis”

Revelation 3:1–6

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Summary

“Pretend Christianity might impress some in the outside world. But pretend Christianity does not impress Jesus. In fact, Jesus hates and stands in opposition to pretend Christianity with the righteous wrath of God.” Listen to this week’s sermon as Pastor David A. Ritchie preaches from Revelation 3:1–6 and explores Christ’s message to the church of Sardis.

Scripture Reading

"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, ESV).

Introduction

In the year 1891, the British playwright and poet Oscar Wilde published his one and only novel. The name of that novel is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [**The Picture of Dorian Gray**]. The story is set in the late 1800s in Victorian England, and it begins by recounting the life of privilege and leisure of the London aristocracy. But slowly, it devolves into a tale of supernatural horror.

The novel's first scene depicts an up-and-coming artist painting a life-size portrait of a wealthy young Englishman named Dorian Gray. Dorian's outward appearance is almost overwhelmingly handsome. All who come into contact with this young man are at once enchanted with his striking looks, his youth, his polite dignity, and his engaging charisma. And the painter yearns to translate all of these qualities into his portrait.

The artist pours all of his passion and soul into this picture of Dorian Gray, so much so that when it is completed, it is immediately regarded as the artist's unrivaled masterpiece. For even more than capturing Dorian's appearance, this painting seems to have somehow magically captured his very *essence*.

Before the story begins, Dorian often spent his time serving the poor of London and raising funds for social projects for the improvement of the underprivileged. But then, the impressionable Dorian Gray falls under the influence of an English Lord, who convinces Dorian to forsake using his wealth and privilege to serve the poor and the greater good of society and instead indulge his darkest desires and even most wicked cravings.

Dorian eventually succumbs to his worst temptations and falls further and further into cruelty, following his every whim and impulse. But still, Dorian's outward appearance seems pure and noble. However, the true reality is a depravity and a selfishness that is turning him more and more into a hideous monster beyond rescue.

Dorian can hide and conceal his true ugliness from those who look on his outward appearance. But unbeknownst to him, the *picture* of Dorian Gray tells no lies. As he becomes more wicked, his portrait becomes more hideous until the image of Dorian is no longer recognizable. One would never guess that it was even the same painting if not for the distinctive signature of the artist.

Through intrigue and murder, Dorian tries to destroy the painting for the truth it reveals. But in destroying the painting, he destroys himself. For despite all external appearances, the monster in the frame is the *true* Dorian Gray.

Dorian Gray's story is a haunting reminder of the human capacity to project purity and life while concealing corruption and death beneath external appearances. So, too, we must admit, it's even possible for the people of God to put on masks of outward holiness and spiritual vitality to the world but be compromised with sin in our hearts.

But the book of Revelation reminds us that Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, is not fooled by outward appearances. He is more than able to see and discern the true nature of our hearts. For he is the One who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars in his hands (Rev 3:1). Christ's knowledge of his people is perfect. He sees us with absolute clarity. He discerns the truth behind our pretenses.

But the good news is that Christ loves his people too much to merely let them hide behind masks of unreality. He confronts those he loves. And he calls us out of the self-inflicted slavery of darkness and into the freedom of his marvelous light.

That call to freedom and life out of death and darkness is at the very heart of today's Scripture reading, which is Christ's message to the ancient church of Sardis. And like all of the messages to the churches in Revelation, we will see this message is just as relevant and real to the church of today as it was to the church two thousand years ago.

Exposition

1.) The City of Sardis

Archeological studies suggest that the city of Sardis in Asia Minor was first founded over 3500 years ago. That means at the time the Apostle John was writing the book of Revelation, the city of Sardis was already a deeply ancient place, older even than Israel's Exodus from Egypt.

Sardis was also a very wealthy city because it was settled near a river with massive deposits of gold and surrounded by fertile plains that were ideal farmland. So, to protect their vast wealth and deter invasion, the people of Sardis built a citadel fortress on a steep hill that was thought to be impossible to climb [[The Acropolis of Sardis](#)].

This citadel was legendary in the ancient world and considered "the safest place in the world."¹ It was like the ancient equivalent of Fort Knox, which securely holds the gold reserves for the United States. So, you can imagine how the people of Sardis would have felt pretty safe and comfortable behind their fortress walls.

But everything changed when the Persian nation attacked. King Cyrus the Great of Persia began a military conquest of Asia Minor around 547 BC. The Persian armies swept through the towns and cities of Asia Minor like a destructive whirlwind. Still, initially, the city of Sardis would not be conquered.

The people of Sardis retreated into and rested behind their strong fortress, while the Persians laid siege to the city below. But history tells us that one Persian soldier was able to spot an unguarded weakness in the citadel walls. So under the cover of darkness, like thieves in the night, that soldier and a few men scaled the steep cliffs, snuck into the city, and attacked it from within.

At once, invincible Sardis fell [[The Fall of Sardis](#)]. Many residents of the once-invulnerable city died in the attack. Many more fled for their lives, losing everything else in the process.

This event was arguably the most famous and feared moment in the entire history of the city of Sardis. Even centuries later, it would have been etched onto the memories of the Sardians the same way a New Yorker would remember 9/11.

There is a crucial connection between this event and Christ's message to the church of Sardis. Jesus is saying in Revelation 3, I know you think you are safe behind the wall you have built, but you are far more vulnerable than you realize. And you need to wake up to that truth before it is too late.

That leads us to our second point.

¹ <https://sardisexpedition.org/en/essays/about-sardis>

2.) Christ's Challenge to the Church of Sardis

Like the ancient people of Sardis, the church of Sardis had apparently built a wall to protect them. Only, unlike their ancestors who fell to the armies of Persia, the Sardinian church's wall was not a wall of brick and mortar. Instead, it was a wall of religious appearances and spiritual pretension.

The Christians of Sardis knew how to appear spiritual and devout. They knew how to talk the talk and go through the motions that *looked* like sincere worship. And apparently, they could even fool many people because they had a "reputation" for spiritual life.

But Christ sees the reality of his church with perfect clarity. And he will confront them with the truth that he sees. He says to Sardis, *"...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"* (Rev 3:1b-2).

I think this is actually one of the more haunting warnings in this portion of Revelation for Christians who live in the Bible Belt of America. Even though we live in a nation that is rapidly secularizing, the Bible Belt is still a culture where it is possible to gain some social advantages by merely appearing to be a devout Christian.

And if you have lived and interacted with the people of our culture, you probably know all too well that it is possible to speak in a Christian language, project a cultivated Christian image on social media, and strategically place Christian symbols in our places of business, all the while having hearts that are cold toward God. It's possible to project an image of outward holiness but all the while indulge in secret sins in the dark.

But it would be too easy to reduce the message to Sardis just to individuals. We must remember Christ's message to Sardis was written to a church; an entire congregation of Christians.

Thus, we have to understand it is possible for churches to become environments that cultivate the pretense of Christianity rather than the actual practice of Christianity. It's possible for churches to become places that actively encourage hypocrisy rather than holiness. Any church, any denomination, any theology that cares more about appearing Christian rather than being Christian is in desperate need of Christ's word for the church of Sardis.

The word of Christ calls us to work hard to push against the gravity of a culture that cares so much about appearances. We must instead intentionally cultivate an intentionally counter-cultural environment of honesty and safety, wherein we are free to confess our failures and our shame and receive encouragement and healing grace. With all my heart, I pray that Redeemer can be a place where you can find friendships and where you can experience that type of safety; the safety to be truly honest, truly known, and truly loved.

Pretend Christianity might impress some in the outside world. But pretend Christianity does not impress Jesus. In fact, Jesus hates and stands in opposition to pretend Christianity with the righteous wrath of God.

Spiritual pretending is not spiritual life. Jesus exposes it what it really is—it is death with the appearance of life. It is the handsome Dorian Gray that conceals a horrid monster within. It is an undead Zombie and an unnatural perversion of what the church is meant to be.

Christ's command for his people is to wake up from their sedation to the reality of what is at stake. He calls them to remember and keep and hold to the word of the gospel that has the power to save and sanctify; to fan into flame any remaining ember of true faith and sincere passion for God; to repent and turn away from hiding in the darkness and instead walk in the light before God and with one another.

For if the church of Sardis will not repent, the consequences will be swift and severe. Christ commands: *"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"* (Rev 3:3).

He is saying to the church of Sardis, "Just like the old city of Sardis felt safe behind their citadel walls, so too, you church of Sardis have felt safe behind your pretensions and your hypocrisy. And just like the city of Sardis once fell suddenly in the dead of night, unless you wake up and repent, your fall will be sudden and severe."

The Bible tells us that the Day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night (1 Thes 5:2). And I know this is a hard word to hear. But you need to understand that it is not safe to hide secret sins from a God who sees everything and knows everything. Christ taught, *"For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light"* (Luke 8:17). This is a counterintuitive truth, but we are safest when we are walking in honest confession before the Lord, ourselves, and one another.

Earlier this week, when a group of Redeemer members gathered in this room for midday prayer on Wednesday, I read these words from Psalm 32. It is a passage that shows us that hidden sin destroys us from the inside out, but confession is where we find healing, forgiveness, and the steadfast love of God.

The Psalmist sings, *"Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin"* (Psalm 32:1–5).

Maybe you've never confessed your sin to Christ and asked for forgiveness. Maybe you've been a Christian, but you've slowly stumbled into a disconnect between what you are struggling with on the inside and what you are projecting to everyone else. Today may be the day for you to find the healing grace that you have been hiding from for too long.

3.) Christ's Encouragement to the Church of Sardis

Now, maybe you are hearing this sermon, and your emotional response isn't conviction and shame. Maybe you are angered by Christ's word to the church of Sardis because you are reminded of how often the church has failed to be what it is called to be. Maybe you have been increasingly becoming more and more disgusted with the hypocrisy of Christians and, in turn, more and more disenchanted with the church.

In fact, there is a growing number of American Christians who have left the church but still believe in Jesus. For many, it is just the busyness of American life slowly pressing in more and more on the life and rhythms of American Christians. But for some, it is that the church at large has shamed the name of Jesus through public scandals and abuses of power.

We must not minimize or ignore those scandals when they happen. We must mourn and learn whatever hard lesson that we can learn from such situations. But we must not make the cynical mistake of assuming that there are no sincere Christians or healthy churches.

Even in times and cultures of darkness, God has always preserved for himself a faithful remnant among his people. So, too, even in the church of Sardis, there are those who have pursued holiness. Christ says, *"Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments..."* (Rev 3:4a).

When I read this, I'm reminded of a story in the Old Testament of the prophet Elijah (see: 1 Kings 19:4–18). Elijah lived in one of the darkest times in ancient Israel. The land was ruled by the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. The people of Israel had forsaken their Lord and plunged themselves into the worship of the pagan god Baal.

However, Elijah was not willing to compromise with his compromised culture. He spoke the word of the Lord, even when he was rejected. He stood against the idols and false gods of his culture, even when no one listened. He was willing to believe and defend what was right and true, even if it cost him dearly.

Yet, there was also a moment in Elijah's life of dark despair. He is quite literally starving, seeking refuge in the wilderness. He had been running for his life from those who wanted him dead. As he hides in a cave, he succumbs to sorrow and self-pity. He believes that all other faithful prophets have been murdered except for him. He laments his utter loneliness and isolation. And he asks God to take his life from him.

And in his despair and hunger, the Lord feeds. The Lord encounters him. And the Lord tells him that there are still thousands of those who have not bent the knee to the idols of his culture.

So, too, if you mourn the current state of the church in America, and you wonder if there are any sincere Christians out there, know that you are not alone.

Even now, there are Christians all through this nation who are faithfully serving Jesus with one another. Now, they may not make national news like the scandals do. But each week, they are volunteering to pack free lunches so that children from low-income families do not go hungry over the weekend. Every day, they give their time to teach English to refugees from war-torn lands. They give money every month so that an orphan oceans away can go to school. Every day, they visit the elderly in hospitals and come alongside those who are in need. And every Sunday, they gather in worship where unfamous but faithful pastors preach the word of God and administer the sacraments.

Such Christians are not perfect. They, too, stumble and fall. But they have committed to not hide in the darkness of sin. Instead, they have committed to stumble toward Christ together.

So, if you want to sincerely follow Jesus, you are not alone, and you must not convince yourself that you are alone. The answer to the hypocrisy of the church is not to leave the church; it is to faithfully *be* the church.

Can that be something that we commit to seek together? Can we commit to seeking holiness and sincerity and humility together? Can we commit to seeking Jesus together?

In a culture that cares so much about external image and appearances, may we be a faithful remnant.

4.) Christ's Promise to the Church of Sardis

Now, I'm concerned that there is a way to hear to this passage and misunderstand what Christ is saying. We might think, "I need to be holy, and holiness is just us me trying harder with my own will-power and resolve." And then, when you inevitably fall or fail, you will so easily give up in despair and maybe even go backward into faking it.

Walking in holiness does take intentionality out of our habits and life. It does require our effort and agency and practice. But we must also understand, as the Prophet Isaiah tells us, that even our best deeds—even our most righteous deeds—by themselves are but as filthy garments before the Lord (Isa 64:6).

No, the righteousness we need is not something we can earn. It is only something we can receive from Christ.

True righteousness that can withstand the justice of heaven is a perfect righteousness that we receive by believing that Jesus lived the perfect life we could have never lived, he died the death we deserved on the cross, and he rose again for our salvation.

When we believe that to be true—when we trust Jesus, walk with Jesus, abide with Jesus, and unite our hearts with Jesus—we are imputed with Christ’s very righteousness.

I admit the doctrine of Christ's righteousness being imputed to us is a big spiritual truth that is difficult for us to wrap our minds around. But Revelation is a book of images that help us see the unseen—it lifts the veil that we might behold the things of the Spirit. And there is a recurring image for receiving the righteousness of Christ in the book of Revelation. And that image is a white robe (see also Rev 19:8).

In Revelation, the white robe is a robe that symbolizes we are holy in Christ. It is an outward display that marks God’s people as perfect, pure, and set apart. To wear a white robe in eternity is to say, “I belong to God, and Jesus Christ is my perfect righteousness.”

This is why Jesus makes the promise, *“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”* (Rev 3:4–6).

When we confess to Christ, he will confess us before the court of heaven. The One who would have every right to condemn us stands as our advocate. The One who would judge us has become our justification. The One who can see the truth of our unworthiness clothes us in his very righteousness

So today, if you feel dirty or unclean, know that Christ stands with open arms to receive you. One touch from him can make you clean. One word from him can make you righteous and worthy.

Conclusion

There is a story of Jesus found in John 8 of a Jewish woman who was caught in the act of adultery (see: John 8:2–11). By this point of the gospel account, Jesus has garnered quite the reputation for being a friend of sinners and a thorn in the side of the religious establishment. So they use this woman to create a type of trap for Jesus.

They bring her before Jesus, and they tell him, "Rabbi, this woman is a sinner, she is unclean, she is an adulteress, and she has been caught in the very act of her sin. There are multiple eye witnesses and there is no denying what she has done. The Law of God says that such a woman deserves to die. What do you say?"

The men who ask this question already have stones in their hands. They already thirst for her blood. They want Jesus to say the word so that they can bludgeon and crush her to death for her sin. Or else they want Jesus to say that her sin doesn't deserve death so that they can tell everyone else that he denies the righteous standards of God's holy law. It's a difficult situation.

But Jesus does something else that no one expected. He writes words in the dirt beneath his feet. He then stands up and declares, "Fine. Execute her now. But only let the man who has no sin cast the first stone."

And at once, the mob is silenced. One by one, beginning with the older men, men begin to leave the stones in the dirt and walk away from the woman in shame. The mob quietly dissipates. For each of these men knows that not one of them is worthy to bring judgment upon this woman—that is, except for the one man who remains.

For Jesus is the only One who is without sin. He is the only One who is perfectly righteous. He is the living embodiment of the perfect word of God and the author of the holy law. He had every right to condemn her and judge her. And it is true that the wages of her sin is death (cf. Rom 6:23).

But instead Jesus of casting judgment and death upon this woman, he asks her, "Where have your accusers gone?" She lifts her head and tells Jesus that they have all gone. He responds, "Neither do I accuse you. Now, go and sin no more."

Now, why is it that Jesus can let this woman go? Is he just being nice or lenient to avoid the standards of God's law? No. Jesus is the true and perfect judge. He knows that the wages of sin is still death. He knows that this woman still deserves to be crushed according to the law of God. And that is what makes Jesus's response to this woman so amazing and so moving.

Jesus can forgive this woman her sin because he knows he himself will soon pay her penalty. For he is the One who will go to the cross where he will be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (Isa 53:4).

So, too, when you are tempted to despair and weighed down by your guilt within, do not hide behind a mask of outward performance. Do not be sedated with the false security of spiritual pretense. Instead, hear the words of Christ to the church of Sardis. Wake up and repent. Turn away from sin and toward Jesus. Come to Christ; rest in Christ; be clothed in the white robe of his holiness.

For he is your perfect, spotless righteousness.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Community

1. Read Revelation 3:1–6 out loud with your Gospel Community or family.
2. Christ says to the church in Sardis, "I know your works; you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Rev 3:1b)? How can outward appearances sometimes mask the true spiritual condition of individuals or communities?
3. In Revelation 3:2, Christ urges the church in Sardis to "Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die." What might it look like for a church or an individual believer to "strengthen what remains" spiritually? How can we guard against spiritual complacency and revitalize our faith?
4. The promise in Revelation 3:5 assures those who conquer will be clothed in white garments, and Christ will never blot their name out of the book of life. What significance does the imagery of white garments hold in this context? How does this promise of eternal security and recognition by Christ encourage believers to persevere in faithfulness?