

Sardis: The Church of Unsaved Christians

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[0 : 0 0] It was in his play, The Merchant of Venice, that William Shakespeare first popularized the phrase that perhaps your mother said to you as you were growing old, all that glitters is not gold.

Influenced by Shakespeare a couple of hundred years later, Tolkien writes in The Riddle of the Strider, which is originally meant to be in partnership with The Fellowship of the Ring, transforms that phrase somewhat, and he says this, all that is gold does not glitter.

So you hear from Shakespeare, all that is glitter is not gold. Just because something is shiny doesn't mean that it has value. Tolkien takes it, flips it just a little bit, and he says all that is gold is not glitter.

In other words, something may seem drab and dull at first, but is actually truly precious if you come to understand its reality. Now what both of these men were hinting at, this proverb that they're hitting at at those moments, is at the same truth, and that is that things are not always as they appear.

They're not always as they appear. As many people discovered in the gold rush of the 1840s, the California gold rush, something that seems like a precious metal to the trained eye, to the one with knowledge, turns out to just be a worthless mineral pyrite, fool's gold.

[1 : 2 9] The sermon to the church in Sardis applies this same truth to the Christian world. A church that appears to be full of life can, in reality, be spiritually dead.

Because not everyone who professes to be a Christian is truly saved from sin, is truly forgiven, is truly at peace with God through the work of Christ.

So it's possible then, and it's evidenced in the church of Sardis, that a church can consist of unsaved Christians.

Jesus said it this way in Matthew chapter 7, Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

On that day, that day of judgment, of reckoning, that he refers to in this letter to Sardis, on that day many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name?

[2 : 4 2] And cast out demons in your name? And do many mighty works in your name?

And then will I declare to them, I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.

In other words, all that glitters is not gold. Not every professing believer has been reborn.

The church in Sardis is the last in a grouping of three churches addressed in the middle of this section of chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation.

All three churches were dealing with the same issue, but it was varying levels of spiritual compromise. And their order, as we have discussed the last couple of weeks, presents a progression of bad to worse.

[3 : 45] The subtle compromise in Pergamum evolved into an overt compromise in Thyatira. Sardis then, as the concluding church in this threefold grouping, represents the final stage of development, where compromise kills a church.

And interestingly, as we get through this sermon, and as we think through it, it's not that the congregation ceases to exist.

Deadness does not equate to non-existence. Not every church that is dead is wiped away.

Sometimes that is the case. That's not the case with Sardis. Instead, the church continued under the banner of Christianity without actually being Christian.

Now, there's two dominant themes in this particular message from Jesus that we can't ignore. The first is the divine omniscience of Jesus.

[4 : 56] Omniscience meaning all-knowing. He knows all things. Jesus knows what is true of everyone and everything and what appears to us, perhaps, as a precious metal in terms of a Christian or professing Christian or a professing Christian church.

Jesus knows to be fool's gold. He's the one with the trained eye. He's the one who knows the reality of all things. That's the first theme.

Jesus knows. The second dominant theme in this particular sermon is the righteous judgment of Jesus. The righteous judgment of Jesus. The Lord Jesus knows all things truly.

Therefore, he judges all things righteously. Do you see the connection between the two? He knows all things truly for what they really are.

Therefore, his judgments are perfectly righteous. They're always accurate. He cannot be fooled. So, his judgments are perfect.

[6 : 07] Now, a key feature in dead churches and among unsaved Christians, if we can use that term, is self-deception. We fool ourselves perhaps even faster than we would fool anyone else, which is why passages like this are so vitally important for us to hear and to understand.

Not only does it contain a severe warning for those who will continue on this path of spiritual compromise, but as always, it affirms God's glorious promises for all who persevere in repentance and faith.

That's why it's so necessary. It confronts us at just the place we need to be confronted, and then it picks us up with the promises that we need to be picked up by. The only promises that can actually pick us up.

So, that's what's happening with the church in Sardis. It's what we want to meditate on this morning. Let's consider in verse 1 the church's identity and the Christ titles that are used here.

Look with me at the beginning of verse 1. To the angel of the church in Sardis write, the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

[7 : 20] During Jesus's life and ministry, if you want to know a little background of the city of Sardis, it was as Jesus was growing up as a boy and as a teenager and then on into his ministry, it was the emperor, Roman emperor Tiberius, who was sponsoring several reconstruction efforts in the ancient city of Sardis.

By the time John writes the revelation, Sardis had a large theater in its sitting. It had a stadium.

Its main street was made of marble. It had a marble road. You can look at some of the ancient ruins that are there to see some of the remnants that still remain. It had many religious sites, including monumentally its temple to Artemis.

It had all of these things at the time that John is writing. But the truth is that the glory days of Sardis were well in the past by the time this book was circulated among the churches in Asia.

The city was actually most famous for having been embarrassingly conquered the same way twice in its history. The stories of these conquerings involve the Acropolis of Sardis, which an Acropolis is just a large hill that would be connected to a city.

[8 : 42] And on the top of this hill, there might be a religious site or a temple or something like that. In Sardis, it was a citadel. It was a fortified place for the wealthy and for the soldiers to kind of hunker down when they were being besieged by an enemy army.

The citadel atop the Acropolis in Sardis was only guarded on three sides. Reason being that one side had such steep cliffs that it was determined and believed by most people that the citadel was completely impregnable.

Nobody could possibly gain access to the citadel, so they thought, from that side of the complex. So they never left it guarded.

They left it totally unguarded, unwatched. Well, as you might imagine, on two separate occasions, once in 547 B.C. with Cyrus the Great, and then again in 215 B.C., enemy soldiers invade the citadel from the unattended side.

They scale the cliffs, they climb over, and they walk to the front where the gate is, and themselves, they open the gate to allow the army in. That's what Sardis is famous for historically, not only today, but even in the days of John when he's writing the Revelation.

[10 : 02] It is known for these infamous events which serve as parables to the state of the church in Sardis. Just as the soldiers had been defeated due to a lack of vigilance, the church had left its doctrine unguarded and was almost entirely dead.

Well, that's the church's identity. Let's think now about the Christ titles that are listed here. Jesus says, write the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

So, in Jesus' self-revelation, there seems to be mystery at first, but really what Jesus says about the seven spirits and the seven stars is defined for us in the first chapter.

The seven spirits of God refers to the Holy Spirit. Just set your eyes on chapter 1. You're open to chapter 3. Look over at chapter 1 in this Trinitarian greeting in verses 4 and 5.

Revelation 1, 4 and 5. John to the seven churches that are in Asia. Grace to you and peace. Number one, from him who is and who was and who is to come.

[11 : 17] That's God the Father. And from the seven spirits who are before his throne. And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

Do you see where the seven spirits of God are sandwiched here? It's in this Trinitarian greeting. John writes and he says, I'm sending you grace and peace on behalf of the Father and the Son.

And sandwiched right in between is the seven spirits of God, which is just representative. It's a different way of referring to the Holy Spirit. Now, it's not entirely clear why Jesus used seven spirits in this self-revelation instead of just saying Holy Spirit.

This is not common in the scriptures. It's unique to these few chapters here in Revelation. It's not exactly clear why he does that, but it will be helpful for you to remember that there are certain numbers that are used in the book of Revelation that have significant symbolic meaning.

Seven is one of them. It's not always, especially in Revelation, intended to provide a precise number, but it is a symbol, a representative of fullness, completeness.

[12 : 31] So, Jesus doesn't mean for us to conclude here that there are seven distinct spirits of God, but that he possesses the fullness of the knowledge of the Holy Spirit, who is everywhere present and fully apprised of all that takes place.

Notice what it is that Jesus says. The words of him who has the seven spirits, who has the Holy Spirit, the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, this is a statement of Jesus' divine oneness in the Trinity, his divine oneness with the Father and the Spirit.

So, what is it that he's saying? He's saying, I know. I know everything. I know what's true of you Sardisian Christians.

Everybody else thinks one thing of you. I know what's actually true of you because I'm the one who has the seven spirits. I am one with the Spirit. I have the fullness of the knowledge of God.

[13 : 38] We're also told in chapter 1 that the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. You're in chapter 1, perhaps still. Look at verse 20 there. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Now, angel, angelos in Greek here, isn't referring to a heavenly being, but to a messenger from God. It can literally be translated as messenger.

The messengers to the churches are best understood as the pastors who serve as Christ under shepherds to the church.

Okay? They are his messengers. They care for his people. That Jesus has the seven stars. What he says in chapter 1 and verse 20, and then again in chapter 2 and verse 1, he phrases it that he holds them in his right hand.

He means the same thing here. That he has the seven stars. That he holds them in his right hand. Speaks to his authority over the churches. So the bottom line of these Christ titles is this.

[14 : 55] That Jesus is the Lord. He is the Lord God. He knows all things. He has authority over all things.

He knows what's true of each one of us, and he will judge each of us in perfect righteousness. So from the very beginning of this message to Sardis, he wants them and he wants us to understand his omniscience and his lordship, that he knows what's true, and that it is before him that each of us will ultimately stand in judgment.

That's the identity in the Christ titles. Let's now look at the complaint. Now, if you've followed along closely in the last few sermons, you'll recognize that we missed one of the categories here, which would typically be the category of commendation.

The reason we've skipped it is because there isn't one. There is no commendation for this church. In fact, it's one of two churches among the seven that receives no commendation whatsoever.

The other one is Laodicea, which we'll get to in a couple of weeks. Now remember, Jesus' judgments are perfect. So the lack of a commendation is due to the reality that there was truly nothing worth commending.

[16 : 16] Even Thyatira, who was accommodating a Jezebel false teacher in their church, still received a commendation. But Jesus comes to Sardis and to Laodicea, and he has nothing good to say.

Nothing. Why these churches, these two churches don't have commendations? Well, it's because they both represent the final developments in both spiritual complacency, that's Laodicea, and spiritual compromise, that's Sardis, which produces spiritual death.

These are dead churches. Jesus is on the outside looking in. There's no commendation there. So we move directly to complaint. Look at the end of verse 1.

Jesus says, I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you're dead. Look at the second part of verse 2. I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

So Jesus' complaint here is that though it appears to outsiders as a vibrant congregation, the church in Sardis is actually comprised of unsaved Christians.

[17 : 32] They appear to be alive, but they're truly dead. And in this context, the New Testament always uses death to describe the unregenerate, the unsaved.

When Jesus says it's a dead church, he doesn't mean that if you go to a service there, it's a little chilly, and people don't sing very well, and that people are a little bit rude and to themselves and introverted and all those kinds of things.

That's not what Jesus means. When Jesus says the church in Sardis is dead, he means they're not believers, that it's made up mostly of unregenerate people. Something about the church in Sardis seemed spiritually vibrant, and we could jump into all kinds of speculation as to what that is and how it corresponds to the same kind of situation today, and we won't do that, but in Jesus' perfect evaluation, they're spiritually gone.

But what is it that killed the church in Sardis? Nothing explicit is stated in Jesus' words, but the context points to spiritual compromise having run its full course.

Jesus uses soiled garments in verse four, indicating that the problem was a loss of doctrinal and moral purity.

[18 : 54] In verse two, he says that their works were found incomplete in the sight of God, revealing that their profession didn't match their lifestyle. In other words, they were claiming Christ, but they weren't showing the fruit of genuine conversion.

And if you track the progression from Pergamum to Thyatira to Sardis, it becomes clear that toleration of idolatry and sexual immorality reached its peak in Sardis, and it produced this death about which Jesus warned.

What killed the church in Sardis? Spiritual compromise. Now remember, at the heart of spiritual compromise is a desire to maintain a Christian identity while justifying participation in the world.

It's when someone decides, I'm a Christian, I want to be known as a Christian, but I'm gonna justify participation in the world's ideas, in the world's philosophies, in the world's religion, and in the world's morality or immorality.

Now remember, the religious culture in ancient Rome at this time didn't mind adding gods as much as it minded condemning gods.

[20 : 22] They were okay with someone following Jesus until that individual claimed that Jesus was the exclusive God and the only way to forgiveness and to eternal salvation.

The exclusivity of the gospel resulted in persecution as we've seen so often in the first four churches. But notice, there's no mention whatsoever about opposition in Sardis.

Nothing. There's no Jezebel figure. There's no Nicolaitans. There's no Antipas who has been brutally murdered in front of the church.

There's no people like in Smyrna who Jesus says are about to be captured and imprisoned and then killed. There's nothing like in Ephesus where the people are constantly being assaulted by the religious programs of the world around them.

Nothing like that is mentioned or is true of the church in Sardis. Why? Why is there no opposition there? Because the church in Sardis ultimately had achieved its end, its desired end in this spiritual compromise.

[21 : 35] What was it trying to do? What did it want? A comfortable, non-threatening Christian experience that professed to follow Christ while accommodating and participating in the pluralism and immorality of its culture.

That's what compromise desires to do. It wants to maintain the identity while enjoying the pleasures of the world. It wants to maintain a Christian label while not professing to be exclusive to Christianity for anyone else.

It waters down the gospel. It denies the gospel. It lives in sinfulness willfully. Sardis had achieved its desired end. So there's no opposition there.

Why would there be? There was nothing to oppose. It's precisely like the churches today who profess to be Christian while accommodating narcissistic worship and affirming the rampant immorality of our culture.

They appear to be alive. Many times they have large congregations. Lots of money. Lots of glitter. No gold.

[22 : 55] Jesus says they're dead. Now here's the terrifying truth of it all. Jesus knows. He knows. Look at what he says in verse 1.

I know your works. Except in this case there's nothing positive that follows. It's only negative. What Jesus knows to be true of Sardis is what everybody else thought was different.

Everybody thought it was alive. Jesus says no you're dead. I know the reality of your heart. I know the reality of your condition. You see you can't punk Jesus.

No one who isn't a true Christian can fool Jesus into thinking that they are one. No one who is a genuine Christian will be mistaken by Jesus for someone who isn't.

Why? Because he knows all. And it was precisely because of Jesus' omniscience that we can be certain of his righteous judgment.

[24 : 04] Now for some of us this is a wonderful comfort because we blow it a lot. We sin a lot. And in those moments we rest on the fact that Jesus knows what is true of me.

Other people may look at my life at any given point in its history and in its existence and say there's no way that guy's a Christian but Jesus knows what's true. Jesus knows he saved me.

For others of us though this is no comfort at all this should be absolutely terrifying to you. You may have everyone in this church fooled.

You may have everyone in your family fooled. Your circle of friends may not realize what's true. You may have even fooled yourself but you will never be able to deceive the one who has the seven spirits of God.

And on that day you will have to stand before the one who has the seven stars and he will be the one who determines whether your Christianity is true or whether it is false and he cannot be deceived.

[25 : 13] He will judge perfectly righteously in that moment. That's the complaint. Look with me now at the correction and the consequence.

verse 2 the very beginning wake up Jesus says and strengthen what remains and is about to die. Look now at verse 3 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.

Now here's how I want you to think about this correction first. As always Jesus demonstrates incredible mercy.

This is mercy in this correction. It's merciful because he is the one that's actually providing a solution for the church.

He is still providing time time for them to repent time for them to turn to receive his full mercy if they turn to him in faith and repentance but if they reject his correction they will endure his full judgment.

[26 : 37] so if! repent and you need to hear it the primary instruction here if you look at it is to wake up wake up is defined by Jesus as this strengthening what remains remembering what you've received and heard keeping it and repenting and repenting remembering what you received and heard that's the gospel message the gospel of Jesus keeping the gospel message and all of its implications repenting of sin Jesus says wake up and this is how you do it you return to the gospel the circumstances and the complaints for each of these seven churches vary each of them is very different the solution in every sermon is exactly the same it's exactly the same every time repent and believe repent and believe whether a congregation as a whole or an individual the only solution is to stop trying to maintain this Christian identity while holding hands with the world at the same time it doesn't work it's not actually possible to do it and here's the amazing truth about it it doesn't matter how far or how long you've continued in your sin Jesus stands ready to fully completely forgive you right now he'll forgive you right now you can receive his mercy he warns you because he loves you he issues this call because he wants to save you that's his desire you'll never find a love like this anywhere else you will not find love like this in the world you won't you won't find love like this in anyone else except in Jesus the world offers it it offers all kinds of satisfaction it's all glitter it's no gold and you may look at

Jesus and you may say there's no glitter here it's dull it's drab it's offensive but it's precious and he stands waiting ready willing to forgive you his call is issued to you some of us we wonder when will God call me he's calling you now right now through his word he's calling you but you must respond in faith and repentance he won't do the believing for you he won't do the turning for you you must respond to his call though Jesus offers his mercy through the solution he also confirms the consequence if you don't obey you say all of that mercy and love stuff that sounds great but what if I don't want to do that what if I'm not ready to deal with the implications that comes from being a true

Christian listen to what Jesus says here if you will not wake up I will come like a thief and you will not know what hour I will come against you the word for wake up here it literally means to be vigilant in fact that's probably the better way to translate it if we're being honest that it means to be vigilant be watchful and it's almost always used in scripture in the context of preparing for a coming threat a threat against you that's why Jesus refers to himself as a thief Jesus in this passage is the threat he is the one you must be vigilant of the fact that he will make sure you do not know the hour of his judgment requires that you waste no time that you respond immediately because you do not know the hour that he will come against you this is not a reference to some secret rapture this is a reference to judgment which your judgment could happen today it could happen today he says if you will not wake up you will not know the hour that I will come and when

I come for you I'm coming against you as an enemy as a thief in judgment don't waste another moment turn to Jesus and live he wants to save you he desires to give you mercy receive it let's finish with the call and conquer sequences in verses four through six we finish with wonderful promises again verse four yet you have still a few names in Sardis people who have not soiled their garments they will walk with me in white for they are worthy the one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments 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 this term name is an important one it's an important thread to keep things popularly contextualized to our week it is a clear thread through this particular passage it's used four different times you have a name he says in verse one reputation what's given to us as reputation is literally the word for name you have a name of being alive or a name for being alive verse one you still have a few names verse four

[33 : 23] I will never blot out his name verse five I will confess his name verse five now what's the significance of the emphasis here one of the elements of spiritual compromise is an aversion to publicly confessing the name of Christ and what we mean by confessing the name of Christ is by embracing the gospel with all of its implications now here's what many people in our particular religious climate prefer to do they want the things that seem good about Jesus they want the love they want the self sacrifice they want the example of ethics and of morality to some extent they want the mercy that is offered they want the man who sits with and has dinner with publicans and with prostitutes they want all of that all of that's good what they don't want is moral demands they don't want sex between a man and a woman within the confines of marriage they don't want the sanctity of human life they don't want a number of other things that we may name in the course of all of that so what they do is they attempt to keep and maintain this particular identity because they like these particular things about

Jesus but they want to maintain all of these other things at the same time that are completely opposite of who Jesus is and of what he teaches so then one of the elements of this compromise is that they will not publicly confess the name of Jesus unless it's convenient for them to do so but one of the promises for those who will truly confess Christ is that Christ will confess them before the Father do you see it there I will confess his name this is the opposite experience of those who are Christian in appearance only that will hear Jesus say I never knew you depart from me you workers of lawlessness the people that will stand in judgment and will say Jesus I went to church on Sunday I didn't even just go to church I went to Lakeside Bible church where they read the scripture for like three hours on a

Sunday morning and they sing all these songs and they don't they don't have classes for my kids to go to and they got all this I even went to the heart church and he'll say I never knew you what happens for the conqueror is the opposite of that you've experienced a graduation before where you stand in line with your cap and gown and you eagerly await for them to call your name so that you can walk across the stage and you receive the recognition of that moment and the honor of that moment and this picture is of standing in judgment and Jesus has the book of life the book that has the record of all the people who belongs to him and you stand there and you wait and with anticipation and finally you hear it you hear Josh Francis maybe you hear Amy Blevins you hear Marty Cain you hear Evelyn Smith so on and so forth Jesus says if you will confess my name I'll confess your name at the moment it matters most which is when you stand in judgment before my father who has wrath for sinners but I took your wrath for you and

I will declare your name before him that's the promise of the gospel that's the promise the one who conquers through faith in Jesus the conqueror who does not soil their garments by flirting around with the immorality and idolatry of this world Jesus will publicly confess your name he will not be ashamed of you he says as much himself in Matthew 10 everyone who acknowledges me before men I also will acknowledge before my father who is in heaven but the promise gets even sweeter in the verse not only will Jesus confess your name but he promises to never take your name out of his book he holds his people firmly eternally secure in his hand no one can pluck you out he says he's not a fickle savior once he writes your name in his book he never takes it out come to him and live live eternally

I don't believe we're a Sardisian church I don't want to have the kind of pride that would suggest that we're above falling into something like this because we certainly are but I do want to ask this question as far as an individual application is concerned are you a Sardisian Christian do you bear all the kind of outward trappings of the Christian religion but you know inside you're dead life isn't really all that bad you have happiness you have joy you enjoy life to some extent it's not that you know it's not that it's that when it comes to the things of the spiritual life you know there's nothing there it's not real and there could be a hundred different explanations for why it isn't for you but the fact is you look like a

[39 : 03] Christian but you're not and perhaps the Lord is dealing with you somewhat this morning maybe he's poking at your heart you know what that's like it's a miserable experience isn't it to come to the word or to hear a sermon knowing that this is the message that God intends for you it's a miserable experience and some of you maybe perhaps you're here this morning and you're just miserable can I ask you what's your response to that work of the spirit when he's kind of poking at you and he's saying this is you you look like a Christian you're not really a Christian what's your first response you're you're probably seeking some kind of comfort from your conviction you need to seek comfort from your conviction but where you search for that comfort is what makes all the difference if you self soothe in a spiritual sense by reflecting on all the Christian things you do and you try to find comfort by thinking about the church attendance and the giving and the and I'm not as bad as this person and I and I

I don't do all of those things and I'm I'm just I'm a good Christian man or I'm a good Christian woman or boy or girl and you're just trying to think of all the things that you do that looks Christian I think that if that's the way you're trying to find comfort you've missed the gospel part you've missed that part true spiritual life comes not from the religious things that you do but from what Jesus has already done he lived the life that you should have lived and he died the death that you deserve to die he bore God's wrath for sin and he proved it by raising from the dead and now he calls you to believe and trust what he has done what he has done try to focus with me for just a second it's not about what you do it's about what he's done it's about fully coming to him and saying nothing in my hands

I bring simply to the cross I cling of course to embrace Christ is to accept all the implications that come with his lordship which means that if you're going to be a true Christian compromise is not an option it doesn't work the the old adage goes he's either lord of all or he's not lord at all that's true so remember the gospel that's what he says keep the gospel and repent he who has an ear let him hear what the spirit says to the churches