

Jesus Christ Among His Churches IV - Morning Service

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[0 : 00] Oh, good morning, everyone. If you're new and you don't know me, my name is Aaron. I'm one of the ministers on staff here. And we're in a series looking at Revelation. And I'm just going to focus on the first six verses of our passage this morning.

And you heard them read. They're difficult words. Of all of the short little letters to the churches at the beginning of Revelation, this is probably the harshest letter.

But it's a letter that we should be grateful for. I mean, if you're going to get rebuked, who do you want to be rebuked by?

Every now and then, my daughter B will be sort of picked on in a park or a playground or something. And a couple of those times, I've lost my temper with the little culprits.

And I've gone up to them and I've yelled at them. And a couple of times, I've actually grabbed them and marched them over to their parents. And we've had a conversation. And Amy always gives me that sort of look of like, this is not what you do in Vancouver.

[1 : 08] And she's right. There's better ways of handling that. And often I've had to apologize to these poor little kids. Because, you know, who do these kids want to be told off by?

They want to be told off by their parents. Somebody that they know loves them. Not some random angry foreigner, you know, in a park, right? So, whilst Christ's rebuke here this morning is very full on, it's very harsh.

The one who was rebuking this church in Sardis is the one who loves them. It's the one who holds the seven churches in his hands.

Who walks amongst the lampstands. Who is with them. Who is knocking on the door. It's the one who has all of the answers. It's the one who is rebuking them is the one who gave his life for them.

And the purpose of the rebuke is not to wipe them out. The purpose is to, so they'll turn around. Well, with that, let's get started. Sardis, by all accounts, was a huge and a powerful city in the ancient Near East.

[2 : 14] One of the most important in ancient Rome. And it was wealthy and it was multicultural. And I read that it had a fantastic climate. And it was a great location. It was built on top of this natural sort of citadel.

So imagine a mountain that has three sheer cliffs on three sides. And it's sitting right on top of that. It was regarded as impregnable. Down below was this very fertile land where they'd grow an array of things.

So it sounds fantastic, right? If you're going to live somewhere, this is the place to live in ancient Rome. And we hear that there was a church there. And the church had a great reputation.

One of those churches that probably you'd recommend to your friends if they're moving there. If you've got a friend and they're moving to Sardis. To Sardis? There's a great church there, I've heard.

You should check that church out. Lots of programs. The minister is really nice. Not a real rah-rah guy. You know, lots of stories. Very active, friendly people.

[3 : 16] You know, it's a church that you might recommend to your friends. Well, a surprise comes fairly early in our passage. Jesus says to them, You have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead.

You're dead. How is that possible? How can a church with a good reputation be actually dead? I mean, wouldn't it be obvious?

Wouldn't all the people just leave? Well, not necessarily. Not for a while, anyway. It's a bit like water skiing. You're hanging out. You're sort of on the water, and you're hanging on to this rope behind the boat.

And this rope is your lifeline. It's the thing that keeps you moving forward. When you let go of that rope, you actually keep moving forward for a little while. And from the shore, everything probably looks like okay.

You're still moving. As a Christian community and as individuals, we have entered a life, a way of living, a belief that does not work apart from one key relationship.

[4 : 20] That's the lifeline. And when that's dropped, you can look good for a little while. But you will eventually sink. And that's what's going to happen to this church in Sardis unless they turn it around.

So they had a great reputation. It was the place to be. It was a lively place. But they had gone to sleep on a reputation. Which is why the words of Jesus in verse 2 are, wake up.

Wake up, people, he says to them. It literally means be watchful. And that's a phrase that would have had special meaning to this city. Because remember I said it was built on this natural citadel with these three cliffs?

Impregnable, supposedly. But in their history, they had been invaded twice. And what had happened is an army had come and an army had sent up just a couple of people who had climbed these cliff faces.

And Sardis didn't really guard these cliffs too well because who's going to climb up them? We don't have to worry about that. But these guys had climbed up, had got into the city, had basically opened the back door and had been invaded.

[5 : 32] So when Jesus says, be watchful, he's giving a nod to those painful memories where a lack of watchfulness was very, very costly. Jesus says to this church, wake up.

You must see the reality of your situation. You must see the danger you're in. But they're doing fine. Had no idea they were in trouble. There's a line in our liturgy.

We said it this morning. Which I think helps to explain this. And the line is, have mercy on us, miserable offenders. Now I wonder if you've often said that with your fingers, you know, crossed behind your back.

Where you thought, I mean I'm saying it but I'm actually not very miserable. The prayer book is not talking about your feelings. Yeah.

In this case, it's using this word, this word miserable in its old sense, which means an object of pity. Now C.S. Lewis is very good on this.

[6 : 40] C.S. Lewis, he says, imagine from a height looking down at two trains hurtling towards each other on the same track. You know in a minute there's going to be absolute carnage.

These people, in the old sense of the word, are miserable in the sense that we should pity them. They have no idea of the trouble they're in. They could be people in their carriages laughing at a joke and still we should regard them as miserable.

That's the sense of the word in the liturgy and that's a great description of the church in Sardis. They had no idea what was going to go down. Miserable offenders. Christ pitied them and so he speaks to them.

Now a good question to ask is this. Why? Like what happened to these folks? Like, was it internal stuff? Was it external stuff?

What went wrong? How did they arrive at this kind of dead state? Well it's very interesting. I want you to cast your mind back over the last few sermons and have a think about in other churches what were their problems?

[7 : 48] In Ephesus, you remember? What was the problem? False teachers. They were getting poisoned from within. Smyrna, they were a very poor church and they were being persecuted by the local synagogue. Pergamum, people were literally being killed for their faith in that church and they had false teachers.

Thyatira had Jezebel poisoning that church. Philadelphia, they were a weak, small, weak church being persecuted by the local synagogue. Now what horrible thing was going on in Sardis that caused this great church to become spiritually dead?

And this is what's very interesting. There's no problems mentioned here. And that's what's really poignant about this letter. There's no mention of external pressure, there's no mention of heresy, and there's no mention of suffering.

What killed them? What killed them was half-heartedness. Look at verse 2. I have not found your works complete in the sight of God.

I have not found your works complete in the sight of God. They were a busy church, but it was superficial. Everything looked good, but it was image management. They were play-acting. They had lost their inner reality of who Christ is.

[9 : 03] They lost the inner reality of what church was supposed to be about. And we can see this in small ways. In small ways, it presents ourselves in our lives. For example, we can sing along to the hymns.

We should be worshipping Jesus, but we're kind of like, you're kind of thinking about your golf grip. But I can preach a sermon and it completely missed my own heart. We can be at a prayer meeting and pretty much just checked out of it, though.

Not really thinking about speaking to the creator of the universe. It's a bit like the husband who ignores his wife. I saw somebody posted on the internet recently.

This guy said, my wife is so weird. She starts conversations by saying, are you even listening to me? Folks, we must be watchful.

We must wake up to Sardis. Looks good on the outside. It's dead in the middle. They were half-hearted. That's probably why there was no external cultural pressure on them.

[10 : 11] They had become the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity. That's why they didn't face any persecution. Why bother? They were so innocuous. I'd spent some time this week thinking about what does half-hearted Christianity look like as a community and as individuals.

They came up with lots of examples. I'll give you a couple. Half-hearted Christianity looks like this. It looks like one example. A faith that is personal but not public. Faith that is personal but not public.

It's a faith that says this is a private thing. It's my own thing. I like to keep it to myself. I don't like to talk about it because I don't want the hassle or the antagonism that might come with being more open and public about my faith.

It doesn't really impact the way I work because that's a separate thing. It's my private little thing. Folks, referencing verse 2, that is an incomplete work. Wake up, Jesus says to you.

Even though you might really want it to just be a personal thing and not a public thing, this is not how a covenant with God works. To follow Jesus is a public vow that makes every part of our life accountable to him.

[11 : 25] But you might say, yeah, but I just don't want the hassle. I don't want the antagonism. Well, Paul says to you in 2 Timothy 1, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord. Rather, join me in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.

What does this mean? He is saying that the opposite of being ashamed, the opposite of being ashamed is being willing to suffer because of your public identification with Christ.

Paul is saying don't be afraid of rejection, don't be afraid of criticism, or worse, be open and public about your faith. And that doesn't mean being strident or argumentative. It doesn't mean trying to force Jesus into every conversation you have.

It simply means don't hide who we are. Don't hide who you are. Our faith, your faith, is central to how you think about things, how you make decisions, how you face the challenges of life.

Being public is just being candid and open about that. A friend of yours who's not a Christian comes to you and says they have some problem. You'll probably want to pray for them in your prayer time.

[12 : 30] Tell them that you're going to do that. Somebody says, oh, you're, you know, somebody says you're thinking about moving. Yes. Yes, we are. My wife and I are really praying about that. We're not thinking about moving, but as an example, right?

My wife and I are really praying about this right now. That's just being open and candid about who you are. So we're talking about examples of incomplete works. The first was a faith that is personal, but not public.

A second would be a faith that is public, but not personal. Many churches are like this. Well, a lot of churches are like this.

And the philosophy is, well, it doesn't matter what we believe. In our church, you can kind of believe what you want. We've all got different ideas. The main thing is we're helping people. We're making an impact on the world.

The big thing in those places is public deeds. And works are fantastic. You should be doing great works in your community. But this kind of church here that's public, not personal, you know what's interesting about this church?

[13 : 32] The media loves this kind of church. This church gets good press. This church has a great reputation. But there's no uniting inner reality in those communities.

It'd be like, imagine if I said to my wife, Amy, I don't know how I feel about you, but I'll do what you say. I mean, that's a marriage that's not going to last. The public, not personal church.

That church won't survive. Jesus says to them, wake up before it's too late. Folks, there's a lot more examples we could have used.

We'll finish with those two there. Okay, so we've talked about Christ's diagnosis of this church in Sardis. And it's grim. You look good, but you're dead. And we've looked at some examples of half-hearted faith, which was their problem.

But in his grace, he doesn't wash his hands of Sardis. He's calling them out of that sleepy state that they're in.

[14 : 34] And he does that in four or five different ways. Let me give you, let me read out the ways he does that. First he says, wake up. So it's a call for watchfulness. And for us as a church, and for us as individuals, we should do this with great regularity, we should assess our spiritual lives.

Second, you see there, he says, strengthen what remains. Whatever you've got going that's good, strengthen that, put some energy into that. Maybe you need to slightly reorient that to the gospel.

Third, he says, remember what you received. When the New Testament uses that word received, it's normally talking about the Holy Spirit. He says, remember, this is not something you can be sort of ambivalent about.

I've put the very life of God in you, the Holy Spirit. Fourth, he says, repent. And what a thing to be thankful for, repentance. It literally means a change in direction.

Repentance is a gift from heaven. Thank God for repentance. Okay, where are we in the sermon? Christ has diagnosed the church. He's called them to turn around, to wake up.

[15 : 37] He's told them how to do that. Next is a warning. The passage goes on. For those who don't wake up, who remain half-hearted, whose works are incomplete. In verse 3, there's this very sobering verse.

If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour, and I will come against you. Again, it's a nod back to the lack of watchmen all those years ago that resulted in Sardis being taken over.

But what does it mean, though? What does it mean that Jesus will come like a thief? Now, I don't think it's talking about Judgment Day. A number of times in Revelation, it talks about Christ visiting his churches, and those references are about times of restoration or times of persecution or judgment, and I think that's what's in mind here.

So the warning is, Sardis, if you don't wake up, Christ will come. He will collapse your church. He will end it. He will let it drown in its own inoffensiveness.

Verse 4. The passage pivots, and it says, for those who do wake up, there is rewards. And there is, there is a section in this church of people who are firing, who are keeners, who have the gospel at the center of their lives.

[16 : 56] And he says to them, he says to them a lot of rewards, we'll just talk about one of them, he says this, he goes, I will never blot out your names from the book of life. It's a wonderful promise. It relates to Roman practice that when they would kill a condemned criminal, before they killed him or her, they would pull out the citizenship role of that city, and they would literally blot out that person's name.

Jesus says, this won't happen to you. It's a wonderful promise. For those who endure, who don't settle for a half-hearted faith, their names are on a heavenly citizenship roster, and they can't be taken off.

Let me close up. Verse one, 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. I don't know what you thought about the sermon this morning, but as I studied the passage this week, I could not help but think about our own church community.

I wonder if you did. Because St. John's is a large church, we're a big city, and amongst Christians all over the world, we have a good reputation.

[18 : 19] But this is not something we can cruise on. And we can't ride on a good reputation, otherwise we will end up being the local, respectable, innocuous church.

church. We don't want to be the church that's easy to ignore. That's one step away from the grave. No, we want to be the church that the city looks at and says, ah, so that is what Jesus looks like.

It's beautiful. Amen.