

Jesus Christ Among His Churches IV - Early Morning Service

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Preacher: Rev. Jeremy Graham

- [0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. Happy Thanksgiving. And it's great to be with you guys. My name's Jeremy Graham. I'm one of the ministers here at St. John's.
- You'll usually find me at this time right below you, setting up for Sunday school. So it's a pleasure to be with you. I invite you to open up your Bibles to Revelation chapter 3, verses 1 to 6.
- We're just going to have a look at Jesus' words to the church in Sardis this morning. So Revelation chapter 3. If you were a homebuyer in the spring of 2008 in America, I could imagine you might easily have looked at the real estate market and thought that buying a house was the least risky financial investment of all time.
- Because a mortgage in early 2008 had a reputation of being a sure-bet moneymaker. You can't lose. So imagine the shock for the new homeowner just a few months later, in the fall of 2008, when the entire mortgage industry, in fact, the entire American economy, collapses around you.
- And the truth is revealed that behind the shiny facade of guaranteed profits, the industry is, in fact, rotten to the core. So from the outside, it looked healthy and alive, but inside it was collapsing and falling apart.
- [1 : 28] In fact, we now know it was already dead. This is a picture of what Jesus says is also happening here in this church in Sardis. If you look with me at the second half of verse 1, this is what Jesus says.
- I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Sardis was a city in what's modern-day Turkey, and it had a glorious history dating back long into the past.
- And the church, although it was only now about two generations old, no more than 40 or 50 years, it was already enjoying a glorious reputation for being a congregation with great programs, working very hard in a city where it wasn't easy to be a Christian.
- It's a church known all over Asia Minor for being alive with the gospel and doing big things for Jesus. But Jesus says, I see right through the name that you've made for yourselves.
- Jesus says, from the outside, you're still known as a church with a history of doing great things. But your outward appearance doesn't fool me. I can see right through your busy exterior, and I see that inside you are dying.
- [2 : 49] What was once true in the past for you in the early days when the gospel was fresh in your ears is no longer the case, Sardis. You're dying, and you're fooling everyone, including yourselves.
- And boy, these are sobering words for any church to hear, aren't they? And for any person to hear.
- Because you and I, we love to make a name for ourselves. Think for a moment how important, how important your reputation is to you, and rightly so. I mean, your ability, say you're trying to get a new job, or you're trying to get, or you're applying to a new school.

Your ability, in part, to get into that school, or to get that new job, is built on your reputation. That's what a resume is. It's a reflection of your experience, and your references are actually just someone else speaking on behalf of your reputation to your potential employer, your potential school.

Or think for a moment about your part in the community, your part in your wider family, or your place at your work. Think about where you volunteer, or where you play golf. It's all built up on the history of your reputation, the name you've made for yourself.

[4 : 05] Think about our online presence that we create for ourselves on social media, Facebook, and all that. It's all about our reputation. Creating a visual identity and a persona for ourselves that makes us desirable and likable to other people.

And then, of course, every church has a reputation, doesn't it? You've got the church over here that is known for caring about the poor, and the church over there that's got great preaching, and oh, haven't you heard about that church down the road that's got a fantastic worship band?

And I'll leave it to you to discern what St. John's reputation is. It's an interesting thing to think about. What reputation do we have among Christians in Vancouver, among non-Christians in Vancouver?

And you and I work so incredibly hard to create our good reputations that once they're created, it's very tempting to rest on the fruit of our hard work.

You know, it takes years to build up that perfect resume. And then we sit back, and we relax, and we enjoy the payoff for all that hard work in the past. Kind of like a subprime mortgage broker in 2008.

[5 : 15] Selling high on the good name that you've built up after years of making money for people. But here's the twist. Here's the twist.

We also work incredibly hard to make sure that no one sees any cracks in our outward reputation. Precisely because there really are so many crack-ups hiding just below the surface inside us.

I don't know about you, but if it's confession time, on my worst days, I live in constant fear that people will see right through me.

That they will see below my exterior that I put on, and that they will no longer like me, want to listen to me, based on what's here in my heart.

The preacher Martin Lloyd-Jones, he put it like this, if you could see, if you could see what's in my heart right now at this moment, none of you would want to listen to a word that I'm saying. And so when we read these words of Jesus Christ, the risen, reigning Lord Jesus, these words to this church in Sardis, here's the most surprising thing that we find.

[6 : 33] We find that Jesus sees right through the slick, polished facade into the darkness of our own hearts, into the messiness of this church, and it does not cause him to turn away in disgust and reject us.

You see, that's what our shame makes us think is going to happen. But no, Jesus doesn't do that. Does it mean that he just ignores all what's wrong in Sardis? Does he just ignore our sin?

Absolutely not. But the Lord Jesus loves his church, and he loves you and I. We tend to think when we read these seven letters, I think I found myself falling into this temptation.

We think of Jesus as a coroner traveling around, diagnosing the cause of death for each of these churches. But you know, Jesus is not a coroner here.

He is a surgeon. And he's diagnosing the disease in these churches precisely so that he can fix the problem, so that he can cure it. Jesus loves his churches.

[7 : 41] He loves you and I. And the sin that persists in us and in his church, it doesn't make him squeamish. It makes him take action to fix it. So, we've seen already how Jesus first rebukes Sardis for its spiritual sickness.

But then, if we just follow the structure of the text, he turns from rebuke, secondly, to giving five commands to fix the problem. And yeah, there are five of them, but we're only going to have time to look at one.

Don't worry. But I want you to be able to see these five. So, just look with me at verses two and three. You can look closer at these on your own later on. Verse two. Wake up.

Strengthen what remains. There's the first two commands. It's about to die. For I have not found your works complete in the sight of God. Here's the third command. Remember then what you received and heard.

Fourthly, keep it. And fifthly, repent. Repent. Five commands to fix the problem in Sardis.

[8 : 49] And we're only going to look at the third one. Remember. Remember then what you received and heard. Remember what? What did the Christians in Sardis, what did they receive?

What did they hear? Well, it could simply be referring to the gospel. They received the message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Sure. They heard it and they accepted it.

It certainly, I think it certainly includes this idea. But there's more to it than that. Because in the New Testament, when people hear the gospel and they believe, what is it that they then receive?

What is it? Who is it? It's the Holy Spirit. We receive the Holy Spirit and a transforming new life in Christ. And I think that's what Jesus is pointing at here.

Remember what you received and heard. You see, the cure for the spiritual complacency that's infected Sardis is to remember the life-giving power and presence of the Holy Spirit that first brought such remarkable action and vitality to the young church.

[9 : 58] That was the source of their amazing reputation in the first place. In other words, right from the beginning, they did not make a name for themselves. It was Christ who first made a new name in them, calling them sons and daughters of God.

And as the fruit, the outworking of that new name, they gained the reputation of being alive. And there's so much more that we could say about this.

But I don't want us to miss the third and final thing that Jesus does in his words to Sardis, which is he makes a promise to them. So, just to review quickly, first, Jesus rebukes Sardis for being spiritually dead inside.

And secondly, he gives them five commands. And we talked about the third one. Remember what you have received and heard. Remember your new identity in Christ. Remember the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

And then finally, thirdly, Jesus promises Sardis and us a new name. He promises us a new name.

[11 : 05] Verse five. Let's have a look. 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. Now, it's helpful to know that right in verse two, that word reputation is actually literally the same word.

It's the word name. So when Jesus says, you have the reputation, he's actually saying, you have the name of being alive, but you're dead. And so three more times the word name appears. So there's a word play going on.

You've made a name for yourself. Let me tell you what your true name is. Remind you of what your true name is in Christ. And let me make a promise to you about this name. It's a beautiful promise because as I've already illustrated, our entire lives can end up focused on building up and then defending our good reputation and our good name.

But the good news of the gospel is that you and I don't have to make a name for ourselves. And better still, we don't have to live in fear that someday someone will expose what's hidden beneath our carefully created public persona.

[12 : 19] Because, precisely because the Lord of heaven and earth has conquered and sits on the throne of the universe and he's already seen right down into the darkest recesses of our hearts.

And when we turn to him in repentance, he delights to clothe us in the righteousness of Christ and give us a new name which is beloved child. There's no greater promise than this promise in verse 5.

The book of life that Jesus is alluding to here, in the book of Revelation, this book of life, we learn later, it contains all the names of those who belong to the Lamb and are washed in the justifying blood of the Lamb.

They're given pure white clothes. That's the image of what we wear in heaven, not the soiled garments we see in Sardis. And these people in the book of life, they're the ones who are assured of their place in the new heaven and the new earth forever.

Because, friends, reputations don't last. But our new name in Christ is forever.

[13 : 28] And so Jesus says to us, remember, remember what you received and how it transformed you when you first heard the gospel. It's the Holy Spirit who's made you alive, not your own hard work.

And hear this promise again that I will make a new name in you. Let me close by reading actually what we heard in Philadelphia, which also talks about the name. It's beautiful.

This is what Jesus says, the promise to Philadelphia. Never shall he or she go out of this temple of God and I will write on him or her the name of my God and the name of my, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem.

That's the name that's been written on us in Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.