Revelation 3:1-6 “A Church in Name Only”

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 September 2026

Preacher: Will Spink

[0:00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

It's okay. But there are similar patterns and themes in the letter to Sardis this week. Unfortunately, not much good to say this time. Not easy words. But God's Word to them and to us in Revelation 3 at verse 1. 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. In other words, here's what Jesus says. He's full of the Spirit and He holds His people, His churches in His hand, and He speaks. 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 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. This is God's Word. Let's ask for His help.
Father, would You indeed give us ears to hear, even hard things, because they're from our gracious Savior, because they're for our eternal good, because He loves us.
Speak to us and help us to hear in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. A beautiful, old, stone church building caught my eye as we drove through the countryside of Ireland this summer. And then so did the sign out front of the beautiful building. Fresh pizza and good wine.
[3:20] It read, the abandoned church had become a gourmet restaurant. And stop in to visit, you'll find something for your stomach, but nothing for your soul. I visited church buildings and cities in our own country with a rich history, with political connections, with crowds of people wanting to be there and visit every day of the week to see the historic site. They'll tell you lots of old stories there, but not any longer the old, old story of Jesus and His love. Full of activity, but now empty of Christ. People often say to me when they're here at Southwood, maybe for the first time,

Pastor, what a lovely church you have here. And many of you have heard me respond to them, yes, it is such a blessing, such a great gift. And I pray that we the people in it are as lovely and as loving as the building. Does our lovely appearance ever exceed our true loveliness?
Jesus. The building is not the measure of a church by any means, but Jesus reminds us here that not just the building, but for people, it's easy for a church to look good on the outside, but actually be a whitewashed tomb, to be full of dead man's bones on the inside.
Not really a pleasant way to start a sermon, I understand. But Jesus cuts right to this death exposing diagnosis when He writes to this church, right? Sardis, I know your works. You have, and what have we been hearing? Faith, endurance, love, toil. No, no, no compliments, no good stuff this time.
You have the reputation. The word is actually name. We're going to come back to it because it's used four times in five verses here. You have a name, a name of life church, a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Spiritual deadness. But nobody knew. Nobody could see except Jesus.
[6:36] I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Is it possible, Sardis? You're a church in name only. You have a reputation without reality, Jesus says. Now, to be clear, there are obviously things happening here. There are signs of life, you might say, especially they've been there in the past to the point that this church has a reputation, doesn't it? A good one. But something is not following through in the present to complete the works. And we don't get a lot of specifics about that, but it seems that they must be resting on their past successes, not finding it urgent to stand for Christ, to share Christ now, today. Perhaps they're now soiling their garments in

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

compromise with the surrounding culture in ways that they never would have just a generation ago.

So where do we need to be alert, watchful of the possibility of reputation without reality?
Is it possible, I'm just asking us to stop and think as a church, is it possible that we could celebrate getting so many people connected in grace groups, but actually not have people experience the grace of Jesus there? To have small groups and small growth because we talk about football and the weather, but never about repentance or a passion for Jesus with one another? Is it possible that we could be in the midst of another really encouraging finish to the fiscal year with income outpacing expenses?
But is it possible that we celebrate having money more than we celebrate the ministry or mission we're going to get to share it with? Is it possible we look alive because we give the hungry food, but never get around to sharing with them about the bread of life? Is it possible that we preach from this pulpit the gospel of free forgiveness of sins, but not transformed life of sacrifice?
Christ. Is it possible that many members of Southwood are good guys? You know, pretty decent individuals.
[9:18] They're nice. They're moral. They would fit in well in Mayberry. But privately, they have no vibrant relationship with Jesus. They don't talk with Him. They don't read His Word. They don't repent and depend on Him day by day. Is it possible that we Southwood sometimes claim to extend the olive branch of God's peace to the Huntsville community? They don't repent and the truth. They don't repent and depend on Him. They don't only for them as they grab it to find it's a dead branch with no substance, no life, no commitment behind it.

They can get pizza or politics, but not the promises and provision of the one true God. It's interesting to note as we look at these letters as we go through. There's not a lot positive to say about this one, but this is the only one so far in Revelation that we've read with no external opposition, no false teaching mentioned, no pronounced persecution. It is not an outwardly tumultuous church.
Things look pretty good. It's just an inwardly lifeless church. That's why Jesus is calling them out here because He doesn't want His people to be lulled into a false sense of security. Let me be clear. Peace and stability can be great things in a church, right? Praise God for that. Let's not fail to be thankful.
For peace and stability. But sometimes when things are calm, you get comfortable. And sometimes when you're comfortable, you can become complacent. And then there's danger.
Would Jesus find, for instance, that we've actually gotten comfortable with where we are when really our works are incomplete. Our passion is waning. Our mission is unfinished.
[11:40] Southwood, ask yourself this question. Are we satisfied to have enough people here to meet budget and have some friends for my kids and that's fine? Or do we long and pray for revival such that everyone in Huntsville knows Jesus? Because that's not true yet? Ask yourself that hard question personally.

Do you ever feel like everyone else is engaged at Grace Group? Or are they're motivated by the sermon? Or are they're all inspired by the worship?
But are you unmoved? Unmotivated? We should look for spiritual death to be exposed in places where we may look alive.
Just last week I was writing the last, oh there it is, the last of the prayers for this October prayer resource that you can pick up this morning, shameless plug.
I wanted it to be here today. And this is one of my favorite things I get to do. I love getting to connect God's Word and my heart and your lives. It's one of my favorite things. It's one of the most seemingly spiritual things that I get to do. And I was doing that and I all of a sudden realized I was completely checked out. I had a lot of other things on my mind if I'm honest.
[13:24] I wasn't connecting with God at all in the moment. I was checking off a list of things that I had to do because I was behind. That's all that was happening. Productive, yeah. Active, yeah. Spiritual, looked like it.

But self-reliant, my heart disengaged, spiritually lifeless. I deleted the prayer that I'd been writing, stepped away, walked outside to talk with Jesus for a few minutes about how I was feeling to repent of that lifeless heart, and then started fresh with with His Word to revive my heart, to bring me back to Him. See, it's easy to feel like the dead one.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

Even sitting in church, you might feel that way. If you do, don't give up. Don't overcomplicate things. Listen to Jesus' seemingly simple, death-defying instructions. He wants to tell you what to do if that danger is true for you or your church.
Wake up. Wake up. Wake up and strengthen what's dying. Remember then what you received and heard. Keep it and repent. What's he saying? Y'all, what you received, what you heard is the good news of Jesus, the gospel of God's grace. That's where life comes from, right? Not from yourself. Why would we expect spiritual vitality to come from anywhere else? It's from Him. Remember what Jesus said in John 15?
We may be doing lots of stuff, but apart from me, you can do nothing, nothing of any spiritual value. In fact, look at verse 6. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away. Back up for me one slide.
[15:51] He's thrown away like a branch and withers, and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. Dead, right? As clear as could be possible.

But if we're not disconnected from him, if we will abide in him, remember the good news of Jesus. Breathe in the gospel of grace. Life will return, and he is the one that bears much fruit. We must remember and breathe in the whole gospel of Jesus. The good news that we were made for relationship with the God who made the universe, right? Wow, that's good news. That even though we broke that relationship, as we have a tendency to do over and over, we do that, that God sent his son to take the death that we deserved so that he could give us life with him again, we could be back in that relationship.
To remember that this good news is not only for me, but for everyone, everywhere that God calls to repentance and life in Jesus. To remember that this good news is not for one day, someday only, but for today as well. I'm brought back near to God. So now, right here today, in relationship with him, I can be honest about my sins. I can hate them for keeping me at a distance from him. I can repent and run home near to him again today. I don't have to wait. I can run back today.
To remember that this good news changes not only my actions, but also my heart, so that I live full of gratitude, so that I live in wonder at the grace of God, so that I live a new life transformed into Christ's image. That's what I mean by breathing in the whole gospel, all of Jesus for all of life. Remember what you've heard. Jesus really is the great treasure. He's the one you need. He's the source of life today and forever. And that's why he says, wake up! Will didn't just say something you haven't heard before. Wake up! You're dead asleep on things you know to be true. And if you won't wake up, he's coming against you. Y'all, the most dangerous place in the world is being distant from God while thinking that you're really close to him. The church is a great place for those who know that they need Jesus because he loves to meet us here in his word and in his sacrament to remind us of the good news of his truth and grace. But church can be a dangerous place because if you are here as a cultural Christian, as a Christian in name only, who assumes that you're alive when inside you're dead,
[19:14] Jesus is saying, watch out and wake up! You may think that there's life, but don't assume that you're safe without staying alert to me, Jesus says. Don't be lulled to sleep in the church. See, the church in Sardis would have known their city's history very well. The main city of Sardis was famous for being built high up on a rock cliff. It just went straight up and so it was thought to be virtually impregnable to any attack. Nobody could get in. And yet they knew that twice in the history of this ancient city, enemies had snuck into the city at night and had opened the gate of the city to its death. The city that thought she was safe the whole time got destroyed. Jesus is warning them, them. And he's warning us against that same reality spiritually. Beware when you think that you stand, lest you fall. Guard the gate of your heart by breathing in the air of Jesus, running back to him, opening his word again and asking him to make it fresh to your heart, to your mind. Pray that you won't just read it and walk away just the same, but that your life will really be different in every way that he intends. Ask him to do that. And don't forget that the good news you hear is never just for you.

The blessing of God never stops with you. The river of God's grace flows to you at your lowest point. He meets you there and then it flows through you to others in need of its life-giving streams, maybe even some sitting right next to you.
Don't leave your works incomplete. Run back to Jesus. Breathe deeply the full gospel of grace. Jesus. If you don't, you'll die. That's how clear he wants it to be. If you don't, you'll die.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

Now, if you ever wondered if Jesus really loves his people, his church, every part of his beloved bride, even maybe especially the ones that need to hear tough things, this ought to convince you. Jesus doesn't write off even the dead and dying ones, does he? Is that what happens in the rest of this letter? Jesus is warning in the strongest possible terms here. Why? Because he loves in order to offer hope.
[22:33] So I want to help you hear it. If you're like me, your initial reaction to a letter like this is to try to convince yourself that he's not talking about me. This is not about us.

And I got to be honest with you, that is exactly what someone with no spiritual life going on inside would say. That's what that person would do.
See, death sounds very much to us like the end. And we don't want to be that failure, right?
But I want to remind you of how the story actually goes. How does the story go all the way through the Bible when God's people are acknowledged to be spiritually dead? See, with God, spiritual deadness is not a dead end. Ezekiel 37, all the way back, God's people are in rebellion and they're in exile far from him and his land to the point that God takes his prophet to a valley of very dry bones as a picture of how dead his people are in relationship to him. And God says to Ezekiel, is it even possible for these bones to live? That's God's question. With an obvious answer, Ezekiel's like, well, not on their own. But God, but you know, and God says, I will breathe life into you and you shall live. I will put breath into you and you shall live and know that I am the Lord.
God says to Israel, I'm going to open your graves and give you life and bring you home to me no matter how far away you are. That's how he works. He does it for his spiritually dead people then.
[24:40] And in the New Testament, in Ephesians 2, he tells the same story, doesn't he? You were dead in trespasses and sins. Spiritually lifeless, hopeless, but God, right? You love those words. There they are.

But God, who loved us even when we were dead, did what? Made us alive together with Christ. By grace, you have been saved. There's no other way to life. It's right there. The hope of the gospel that you are united to Jesus. And so as a result, you are so connected to him that you are no longer dead, but you are now alive in Christ because he too lives. That's how God works. Now back to Sardis.
Okay? You got Ezekiel. You got Ephesians. Now we're going back to Sardis and Revelation. There are a few names still, second use names. People who have not soiled their garments by leaving Jesus for the idols of the culture around them. They will walk with me. Now listen to who Jesus promises to be for those who cling to him. These are what I call death conquering promises because of who Jesus is.
And the first one is right there, the friendship of Jesus. They will walk with me. What's he saying? You're never going to be abandoned. I'm never leaving you. And clothed in white, for they are worthy as they're walking with him. Notice, not just them, not just those few who are already walking with him, but actually everyone who conquers clothed just like them is the point he's making. Not just the ones who are already in white. Everybody else who conquers in just the same white garments. Not because they're perfect. We know better. Not because they're good enough. That's clear they haven't been. But remember, those who conquer are who in Revelation? They are ultimately those who repent and turn to the conqueror. Who turn to Jesus himself.
How do you get white robes? Revelation 7 reminds us, the ones with white robes have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. This is the purity of Jesus given to you, like we watched in the washing with water in baptism. Not the darkness of death, but the new life of Jesus.
[27:33] Jesus. Keep reading. More promises. I will never blot his name out of the book of life. He's promising the security of Jesus. Never will your deadness disqualify you ever again. Your name, third time, stays in his book. In fact, Jesus says, I will confess his name, fourth time, before my father and his angels. Jesus doesn't merely know your name. He doesn't merely write your name indelibly in his book, but actually he speaks your name as his friend. That's the promised loyalty of Jesus before the throne of heaven. He's your advocate, your defender. He speaks your name and says, Father, he's mine. She's mine. I know them. What can your enemies say about that? What can Satan say against that? Satan will try. He's a failure. She's blown it so many times. He's worthy of death. But Jesus says, no, no, no, no, no, listen, I died for Will. I died for Southwood. He's my friend. She's dressed in the pure white robes of my righteousness, safe forever because I will never leave him. I will never forsake her.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

Death conquering promises for us because we're connected to the one who conquers death. You see how Jesus is writing the same story as Ezekiel 37, as Ephesians 2 for the dead people that he loves?
Listen, last question. What gives Southwood any hope of being a church in more than name only? Is it rebuilding her reputation? Will that make her a true church? Is it revitalizing her ministries? Will that make her a true church?
Or is it her Savior? Christ and Christ alone qualifies us to be a true church, part of his living bride? Because he keeps our name and confesses our name before the throne of heaven.
[30:10] Look at this. You are the church in Sardis. What is Jesus saying? Can you believe that he says this given what words are coming about them? You are my bride, my beloved Sardis. You're the church, Southwood, for whom I gave my precious blood and whom I will make radiant and alive forever.

With God, spiritual deadness is not a dead end. Amen? It can't be. It's who he is and how he works. And that is why we must breathe in the full gospel of Jesus for life. That is why we must preach the full gospel of Jesus for our own life and the life of our neighbors. That is why we must live the full gospel of Jesus so that we get used right now to walking with him because that is the only way in which life is found for all eternity. That's how we know we're not a dead church in name only. That's how you can know that you're not a dead Christian in name only. You hear your Savior's voice. You wake up and remember and you repent of breathing any air for life other than the air of Jesus.
Jesus. Jesus. Jesus shows us what God is like. This is so important. When he comes in the flesh, he's showing us that the God who breathes life into dry bones and dead hearts, when he comes as Savior, is, as he says, full of the life-giving spirit. What does Jesus do? Jesus turns funerals into celebrations, doesn't he? Just ask Mary and Martha and Lazarus. In fact, he turns crucifixions into resurrections. Just ask Mary and John and Peter and Paul and 500 others. See, he is the conqueror, the victor over the grave who, as a result, holds the keys of death and hell in the same hand that holds you. So that even death cannot take away the life he gives his beloved church. So if you sense any deadness in you, get near to the one who conquers death and holds the keys and he gives you life. Hallelujah. What a Savior. So that's a lot of good news about Jesus.
Jesus. What about us? I want you to think right now, it's going to get worse before it gets better. I want you to think right now of the thing you've done in your life that most smells like death.
[33:15] Get it in your mind that most deserves death, that most shows the death of your heart even when most of your life looks okay. I want you to think of that. Take a minute. Get that in your mind, what you deserve.

Now Jesus says to you, repent. It's an invitation. Admit that there is no life there, that thing you're thinking of, that struggle you know, but that there's life in Jesus. Come back to him. There's life with him. Spiritual deadness is not a dead end. You can own it. You can admit it and you can turn back to him right now.
Now, listen to what Jesus offers anyone who's dead in their sins. On the night that he was betrayed, he took bread and he broke it and gave it to his disciples as I, ministering in his name, give this bread to you. And he said, take and eat. This is my body given for you. I'm going to take death so you don't have to.
Do this in remembrance of me. And then in the same way, he took the cup and said, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. My blood's the one that's going to be shed.
It's going to be shed for many for the forgiveness of sins. So drink from it, all of you. For as often as you eat this bread and you drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. You say, Jesus died to give me life instead of death. Jesus offers life, forgiveness of sins, washing clean from dirty garments to white robes of righteousness. He is calling you by name. He is walking with you. He is eating with you.
[35:28] And he will never stop. So if you are his, if you are today actively hoping in Jesus alone for your life, you better come eat. Don't miss out on being with him as he's come to meet with you.

You don't have to be a member of this specific church, just a member of some church that says, Jesus is the one who gives life and gives us hope. If that's not your story, then I want to remind you the warning of Jesus is clear, but the welcome of Jesus is compelling. I hope it is for you.
Jesus says either I will come against you and you don't want that and we don't want that for you, or, or he says, I will come for you. I will come give my life for you. I will then speak your name on your

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

behalf before the throne of heaven, the only place where you could be judged and fall short. Jesus will speak your name and stand on your behalf there. Don't come to these elements today that are meant to picture Jesus for you. Come to Jesus himself today. Let us pray with you. And then we've got forever to eat together with him. Okay. Spiritual deadness won't be a dead end for you.

If you come to Jesus, the end of your story is life forever. Let's pray and we'll celebrate together. Jesus, thank you for that promise. Thank you for that offer of life that is free, that doesn't require us earning it, that is beyond anything we could deserve, but is given to us as a gift. Thank you for meeting with us now by your spirit. Strengthen our hearts. Wake us up. Give us life where there's death.

[37:33] We might be with you who you've made us to be. We ask in your name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host