

## **Fifth in the sermon series “Church Are You Listening?”**

### **By: Pastor Timothy Corder**

If you are our guest it's helpful to know that we are in the midst of a series of sermons entitled: “Church Are You Listening!” Take your Bibles and turn to Revelation 3:1-6 and as we read, you'll see what I mean.

Okay—let's familiarize ourselves with the CONTEXT of its writing. This is important if we are to fully understand its message.

Sardis was located about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira and it would have been the 5th letter this carrier would deliver. Review with me: “From Patmos (where John is penning this) to Ephesus, Ephesus to Smyrna, to Pergamum to Thyatira—and Thyatira to Sardis, Philly and Laodicea”

The ruins of 1st century Sardis are located near modern day Izmir in Turkey, when this letter was written; Sardis was at the uniting point of several inland ROADS. Sardis had OTHER claims to fame than trade. You see, five hundred years earlier it had been the capital of the old kingdom of Lydia where the famous King Croesus had reigned. His name might be familiar to you because he was reputed to have been the richest man in the world. How many of you have heard the phrase, “rich as Croesus?” If not—I'm sure you have heard his other name—King Midas. In any case, Midas wasn't the only one with the “golden touch” because the wealth of this TOWN was also legendary—and the SOURCE of all this wealth wasn't just the trade that came their way due to those roads. No—a gold-bearing river—named the Pactolus, ran right down main street. Remember this fact—the people of Sardis were used to being RICH. Kind of like DC—“if they need \$ they just print more”.

Now—the original city of Sardis was built on a mountain 1500 feet above the valley floor and three of its four sides were accessible only by sheer rock cliffs. Sardis was regarded as being virtually impregnable against military assault. Many armies laid siege to Sardis hoping to get at its wealth—but all failed—until King Cyrus of Persia came along. According to Herodotus, the Greek historian, Cyrus besieged Sardis and seeing its high cliff walls, he sent a message to his troops—a message in the form of a challenge. He promised a special reward for any man who could figure out how the unscalable cliffs could be scaled and this untakable fortress taken. Needless to say they did, Hyeroeades when they reached the top, they found the walls of Sardis completely unguarded. The Lydian garrison apparently never dreamed that anyone could find a way up those cliffs. They thought they didn't need guarding. Everyone was sound asleep. So Hyeroeades and his comrades entered unopposed, opened the gates, and Sardis was taken. And—if that weren't bad enough, this exact thing happened again 200 years later when Antiochus the Greek besieged Sardis. A Greek soldier who had perhaps heard the story of Hyeroeades led a group to climb up the same way and found the walls undefended once again—proof of the old adage,

“If we don't learn from history's mistakes we doom ourselves to repeat them.”

In any case—this should help us to see that the residents of Sardis had a track record of being complacent, over-confident people—people who tended to sleep at their post.

And—here's one other historical fact to help you understand this church and the town it served. In 17 AD Sardis was devastated by an earthquake but the emperor Tiberius generously gave a government bailout—the city was easily rebuilt without the residents having to endure any financial hardship at all.

So—three “contextual” things we know thus far: When John wrote this letter, Sardis was rich and complacent—its residents were used to the easy life. The once great “impregnable” citadel was now only an ancient monument up on the hill top. The town had been rebuilt in the valley—but there was no passion for life—no spirit—there.

Well, this lifelessness was paralleled in the church. In fact, most of its members apparently belonged to Christ in NAME but not in HEART. Oh—they had a REPUTATION for being alive—one that had spread far and wide—but according to the life giver they were dead. In short, it was a church of hypocrisy—a church filled with, “let's pretend” religion. Let me put it this way. Ephesus lacked LOVE and Sardis lacked LIFE. Church let's check our pulse.

Well, how can we tell if a church—is dead spiritually? Or is entering the “dying stage?” This is an important question for us to consider because, whereas we currently enjoy HEALTH and LIFE here at BBC...we dare not become complacent as a church. Remember—Sardis was alive once!

Churches are made up of individual believers like you and me—and churches “die” when their individual members cease to grow spiritually. Remember personal spiritual growth is the result of a conscious choice. We have to be INTENTIONAL when it comes to following Jesus. If we don't make this choice—our walk with Him tends to become lifeless—and when enough of US begin to die in this sense—our church does as well. So, “How can you know if we are a congregation of individual believers entering the ‘dying stage?’” There are several potential answers, but I we only have time mention a few found in Sardis. Think of them as warning signs of lifelessness.

(1) The first is RELIGION over RELATIONSHIP.

Jesus said, “I know your DEEDS,” so the believers at Sardis were apparently busy—but religious busy-ness. Sadly, there are a lot of churches filled with members whose individual faith is all about RELIGION—when it needs to be RELATIONSHIP.

And—when I say that A LOT of churches do this—I mean it because one of the main problems in this world of ours is that it is LONG on religion—and SHORT on genuine Christianity. Emily this past week cried, I believe with conviction of needing Faith—but refused “religion”.

Church are you listening—we must be very careful—because the practice of Religion can look a lot but may very well be a counterfeit. People can attend worship every week and serve on committees—and LOOK like real thing. You may even CONVINCED yourself and others that you are the REAL deal...and still have NO real faith. Survey says real faith- saving faith is based solely upon grace, which is extended in the person of Jesus. Grace alone, by faith alone in Christ alone!

Well, let me ask—do you have the REAL THING? I'm not asking how active you are at BBC. I'm not asking if you sing in the choir or come to work day or tithe. I'm asking how REAL is your personal walk with Jesus? Do you enjoy a relationship with Him? If so—how ALIVE is it? How close have you GROWN since you first met Him? And

please don't misunderstand me. I'm not discouraging church involvement—but religious activity that does not encourage and stimulate personal, RELATIONAL growth with our Lord is a waste of time! Empty religion is like digging your own grave. EE-question #4 would you like to be closer to God than you are? Jude the brother of Jesus admonishes us: 20-23 dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, 21 keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. 22 Be merciful to those who doubt; 23 save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh

Follow me for I follow Christ!

(2) A second sign of a dying church: the absence of struggles, from without. They apparently invented the concept of “political correctness.” And, remember, our adversary doesn't waste his limited resources on those who aren't reaching the lost and growing the saved. This church enjoyed peace—but it was like the peace you enjoy as you walk through a cemetery or a funeral home. In a growing, vibrant church—a church that is doing its part when it comes to ministering to its assigned part of the front lines of God's kingdom—in a church like that there is always difficulty. There are always problems—problems that may be unpleasant—but are actually signs of life. A church that stands up for the Bible will stand out—it will seem offensive to some people—but that's okay. Our message and mission is offensive to the adversary and those who have bought into his lies. We must remember what Jesus said in Luke 6:26, “Woe to you when ALL men speak well of you....for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.” Let me put it this way, a truly vital church will always be under attack—and the same goes for growing believers. If you are NOT having problems it could be due to the fact that you are NOT causing the adversary any problems! If you're not facing resistance it's probably because you're not resisting. No martyrs, no Nicalatian persecution?

(3) Third symptom of dying church: a complete focus on the PAST. You see, this church in Sardis was like the city it served, because it relied on PAST. Don't get me wrong—we should always look back and remember God's great faithfulness to us in the past...but if that's all a church does...they live in the “GLORY” days—they stop following His leadership in the here and now...they will begin to die. Listen—it's hard to walk forward while you are facing backward. So churches are in danger of becoming lifeless if:

They stress religion instead of Relationship.

They find themselves without opposition.

They focus on the past

Well—there was some GOOD NEWS in Sardis. In the midst of all these dead or dying Christians there was a Godly remnant—and by the way, there always is! V. 4 tells us that there were a FEW Christians in Sardis who were still loyal to Jesus in heart and mind.

Jesus says, “WAKE UP!” In fact, Paul's says to the Ephesian church: “Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you!” (Ephesians 5:14)

Jesus used these particular words to remind this REMNANT of what had happened TWICE in the history of Sardis when the guards slept at their post. He was saying, "Wake up—or you may never wake up!" or else! 1 Strengthen what remains, 2 remember what you received, and 3 repent! Or else he will come without warning. Now—I don't know when that will happen. No one does—but as Romans 13:11 says, "The hour has come for us to wake up from our slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed." And Matthew 25:13 says, "Keep watch for you do not know the day or the hour your Lord may come." be on you guard and live each moment as if it was the last opportunity for us to share (relationship) share His love with a lost and dyeing world around us, rather than joining them in being dead.

If Jesus were to come today, would YOU be ready? Would He find you watching?