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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes

INTRODUCTION

How many of you have ever been in a dead church and you knew it? Some churches are dead and they don't even know it. I am told the North Star is 30 light years away. If the star died and the light were extinguished, it would take last light 30 years to reach our eyes here on earth; it would be dead 30 years before we would even know it *was* dead. The same can be said of some churches over which God has written, "Ichabod"—the glory has departed. They just don't know it yet. In Revelation 3, Jesus addresses his comments to a dead church. We have already studied the churches at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum and Thyatira. If you were to look at a biblical map, you would see these seven churches make a circle and the order in which they received their letters goes in the order of that circle. I agree with scholars who believe these seven letters were sent to these seven churches even before John finished the rest of the Revelation, so it is very possible the churches at Ephesus got their letter and the other churches heard about it; and then the church at Smyrna got theirs and the other churches heard about it. Then, Pergamum then, Thyatira. It could have been each church was saying, "When will our letter come?" and "When our letter comes, what is Jesus going to say to us through John the apostle?" We have to constantly ask ourselves, "What would Jesus say to Green Acres Baptist Church if he wrote a letter to us?" "What would Jesus say to you if he wrote a letter to you describing your personal relationship with him?" because these seven churches represent all the churches of all the ages.

Jesus is identified in a different way in each letter. "These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God." Those seven spirits symbolize the perfect Holy Spirit. The number seven means perfection in Jewish Gematria, which is the study of numbers. The seven spirits of God and the seven stars means those seven pastors. "I know your deeds." Jesus said, "You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead." That's what Jesus said about this church. Let's read about this church at Sardis.

"To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but I will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

I want to talk about this church but I want to make the application to us today, because even though you are here at church, your Christian life may be experiencing deadness, dullness and dryness. If your Christian life is lifeless at this point, then you need to find out what you can do about it.

I. THE REPUTATION OF THE CHURCH

1. From the member's perspective: alive!

Number one let's talk about the reputation of the church, because Jesus says, "You have a reputation." The reputation can be examined from two perspectives. First, look at it from the perspective of the members. If you went up to one of the members of Sardis and said, "Tell me about your church." They would say? "Oh we have a wonderful church! Our church is great! Our church is alive!" That's the members' perspective. "We have a living church," because that's what Jesus said in verse 1. He said, "You have a *reputation* of being alive. That means they were probably busy and meeting on a regular basis. They gathered on the Lord's Day, they probably had preaching and singing and teaching and a lot of activities. So if you were to ask them, "How's your church?" they would say, "Oh everything's great! We're really doing great!"

Sometimes churches really don't want to accomplish much. I have always had the joy of attending annual associational meetings. Many of you who have ever been to an associational meeting know a lot of times it's not the most exciting thing in the world. They give a whole lot of different reports. I actually heard a man in Alabama at an associational meeting stand up one time and report on his church. He said, "We didn't baptize nobody this year. We didn't have many new members and we didn't take in very much money. We're not doing much at our church." Then he said, "But praise the Lord none of the other churches around us are doing anything either." But if you were to ask that old boy, "How's your church?" "Oh everything's fine! Everything's great!" Sometimes churches think everything's great just because they are holding services."

2. From the Master's perspective: dead!

Look at the Master's perspective. "You are dead!" Here's the problem and it is true even today. We need to make sure as a church we never confuse activity with the anointing of God, because not every activity is a sign of life. Baptists are more activity-oriented than anybody I have ever known. You've heard the little poem that says: Mary had a little lamb / And would have been a sheep / But became a Southern Baptist / And died from lack of sleep.

I have never wrung a chicken's neck, but my mother had an expression, "The most active chicken in the barnyard is the one who just had its neck wrung." When you wring a chicken's neck, that chicken is dead, but it's out there flopping around and running around even though its neck is broken. It's dead but it's busy and that's true of a lot of churches. There's a lot of activity going on but the church is dead. That's what Jesus said about this church here at Sardis.

W.A. Criswell wrote how you can tell the difference between a live church and a dead church. "Live churches are filled with folks with Bibles in their hands. Dead churches are not. Live churches have noisy children and youth. Dead churches do not. Live churches move by faith. Dead churches do not. Live churches have parking problems. Dead churches do not. Live churches emphasize opportunities, but dead churches focus on problems. Live churches are characterized by a loving fellowship dead churches manifest a bickering spirit. Live churches major on strong preaching. Dead churches emphasize liturgy. Live churches evangelize and dead churches fossilize." There is a difference between a live church and a dead church. Even though

some churches think they are alive and some Christians think they are alive, Jesus says, “You are dead!”

What happens to a church to make them dead? I think at one time there might have been life in every church or that church would not have been founded but I think something can happen which can cause that church to become so inward-focused until the only thing they think about is themselves. It’s like the old church I heard about up north who started with a lot of evangelistic zeal and a lot of evangelistic fervor. They built a big sign outside the church that said, “Jesus Only.” Through the years the church began to deteriorate and decline in numbers. They allowed some ivy to grow over the sign until the “Jes” was completely covered up. When you rode by that church the sign instead of saying, “Jesus Only” said “Us Only.” That’s how churches die when they begin to be so inward-focused they don’t care about anybody but themselves.

Dr. A. J. Gordon was a preacher from England who came to a very dead, dull, formal, liturgical church in downtown Boston, Massachusetts. He was a fiery preacher, because God touched his life. He didn’t wear a robe, which was unusual for that very formal church and he preached “Jesus” to those people with great zeal and great fervor and those people sat out there shell-shocked and after one month, they were ready fire A. J. Gordon and send him back across the Atlantic Ocean to England. Then one Sunday he preached a sermon he called “The Funeral of the Church There in Boston.” This is what he said, “Ecclesiastical corpses lie all around us. The caskets in which they repose are lined with satin and are decorated with solid silver handles and abundant flowers. Like the other caskets they are just large enough for their occupants with no room for converts. These churches have died from the disease of respectable formalism and have been embalmed in self-complacency. If by the grace of God this church is alive, be warned to our opportunity or the feet of them that buried thy sister churches will be at thy door to carry thee out. This church is dying soon.” After he preached that sermon he put a casket down at the front of the church and opened it and asked everybody in the church to walk by and see their dead church. As they walked by, they looked in the casket and you guessed it—there was a mirror, because a dead church is comprised of dead members. God did something special in the life of A. J. Gordon and his church on that Sunday and that church became a great beacon for Jesus Christ in New England.

II. THE REQUIREMENTS OF CHRIST

1. Rouse from your sleep

Jesus said about this church in Sardis, “You have a reputation that you are alive, but you are dead.” What about the requirements of Christ? What does Jesus say for them to do because they are dead? It’s the same thing he wants you to do if you are a dead Christian. Number one, arouse from your sleep. Look at what he says in verse 2, “Wake up! Wake up! Come to your senses. You are in spiritual slumber. You are afflicted with spiritual sleeping sickness and you need to wake up to what’s going on around you.”

Vance Havner liked to tell the story of the old farmer in New England who, as he slept one evening, heard his grandfather clock strike midnight. The gong sounded 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 times but then something happened to the mechanism and it kept on striking 13, 14, 15

times. The old farmer jumped up and said to his children. "Wake up, children. It's later than it's ever been." The reason you need to wake up is because it is exactly as it says in the book of Romans, "Wake up for the time of our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. This is not a time to be spiritually asleep." He says, "Wake up! Come on, wake up! Be revived!" and I think there are too many Christians today who are in spiritual slumber. "Arouse from your sleep."

2. Remember your salvation

Number two he says, "Remember your salvation." Look at verse 3. "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard and obey it." If it's true some people have spiritual sleeping sickness, there are also some Christians who are afflicted with spiritual amnesia. They have forgotten what God has done in the past. That would put you to sleep spiritually. You become complacent. You become apathetic but you need to remember there has never been a time when God has ever failed you.

I shared with you a while back that a number of years ago I was privileged to go back to the First Baptist Church of Florala to preach homecoming. It was such a special experience for me to go back to the pew at the very point where I had given my life to Jesus Christ as a nine-year-old child and then to walk down to the front and to sit on that pew and then to walk up on the platform and look in that baptistry. It just did something to my heart to remember what it was and where I was and what happened when I got saved. Do you remember when you invited Jesus to come into your heart? It might have been at a revival, or Vacation Bible School, where my wife was saved. It might have been in your bedroom at home, where Laura Grace was saved. It might have been driving along in a car talking to someone, where Jenni was saved. Where was it? When was it that you first came to know the Lord? Doesn't it do something in your heart to remember the way it was? That's what Jesus is saying if you are dead, just go back in your mind and remember how it used to be and do those things again that you were doing then. Do you remember how excited you were about Jesus? You need to recapture that excitement. Remember your salvation.

3. Repent of your sins

Then, the third thing he says is simply "Repent of your sins." Look at the last part of verse 3 he says "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it and repent!" He says, "If you don't wake up, I'm going to come like a thief." Jesus Christ is going to come and rapture the church and he's coming like a thief in the night. He's going to slip in secretly. That's why he says it's very important for you to repent, because Jesus Christ could come back at any moment. You haven't lost your salvation but it says, "and now, little children, abide in him so that when he shall appear we'll have confidence before him and not be ashamed at his coming." (1 John 2:28) That's why you need to repent. You need to look back in your life and you need to say, "Lord, is there anything that I've allowed to come into my life that would cause me not to be ready for your return?"

I remember when I was a boy I went to South Alabama, and there on a river they still had one of those old grist mills, with a big waterwheel that turned with the water from the river or the

stream or a dammed up lake. The wheel was connected to gears and inside the mill or the millhouse there were two large rocks like big discs that rubbed against each other. People came there to have their corn milled. They threw the corn down and put it between those huge rocks, and that's how they got cornmeal. By the way that's where millers got their name, because they worked at the mill like that. One morning a miller came there to his mill and the waterwheel was not turning because there was only a slight trickle of water dripping over the wheel and it was not nearly enough power to drive those big stones. The miller could have done one of two things: He could have taken his hand and tried to forcibly turn that waterwheel by himself or he could have gone in there and tried to turn those great big, huge millstones by himself, but he didn't. He knew there was a problem upstream so he walked until he found some debris that had dammed the water and diverted it. That's true spiritually. If your life is not clicking the way it should if there is something wrong spiritually in your life some of you need to go back upstream. Go back and find out what it was you've allowed to come into your life to block the flow of the Holy Spirit. What debris have you allowed to accumulate? Habits and attitudes? Go up and throw them away; dig them out and repent of them. Then once again the flow will begin and there will be power in your life again. That's why he said, "You need to repent of your sins. Turn from them. Clear them out. Get rid of them." The Bible says, "Whoever covers their sins shall not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them shall have mercy." (Proverbs 28:3) Don't cover it up with God. Repent of it.

III. THE REMNANT OF CHRISTIANS

Number three, I want to talk to you about something very interesting in this passage and it is the remnant of Christians mentioned in verse 4. He says, "Yet there are a few people in Sardis." This was a dead church right? We have already established the fact that it was a dead church. Yet Jesus said, "Even in Sardis there are a few people who are faithful." Have you ever heard of "The doctrine of the remnant?" It means God has always had a people for himself. He has always had a remnant all throughout history all throughout the Bible God has always had a faithful few. Some people don't like that doctrine but it's in the Bible. It is sometimes called, "The doctrine of the church within the church."

Right now we have about 7,500 members of Green Acres Baptist Church but would you say that all of those members are equally committed to Jesus Christ? No way! We may have three or four thousand who come on a fairly regular basis on Sunday mornings Would you say that those three or four thousand people are all equally committed to Jesus Christ? Probably not. I know that coming to church on Sunday night is not a badge of super spirituality. The fact you are here on Sunday night does not necessarily say you love Jesus any more than those who didn't come back tonight What it does say is at least you are more committed to what is happening at Green Acres Baptist Church on Sunday night than they are. Why will we have twenty-five hundred or three thousand people here on a Sunday morning but on Sunday night such a smaller crowd? Because even though some people don't like to talk about it, there is the committed core of people in every church—the remnant—who are the faithful few Jesus is talking about here.

We love everybody equally and God loves everybody equally but there are some people who by their commitment to Christ place themselves voluntarily in that committed core of people. Do you remember what God told Gideon? "Gideon, gather yourself an army!" Gideon wanted to be

sure he had enough so he gathered thirty two thousand people. Boy that's a great Sunday School attendance, isn't it? Thirty two thousand on high attendance day for going to battle. Then God said, "Gideon, we need to reduce this number a little bit. We have too many. They are all getting in the way of each other. So first of all, tell everybody who is cowardly, who's afraid to go into battle, to go home." Gideon gets out there and he says, "If you are afraid to go into battle go home!" Twenty two thousand of them went home. Ten thousand were left. Gideon is thinking, "Uh Oh! This is kind of a small group." God says, "There are still too many. They are getting in the way of each other. You need to narrow this number down a little bit. Tell them to go down there and drink from the river and I want you to tell all the ones after they have drunk the water that if they bent down and licked up the water like a dog, they should go home. If you were careless and you weren't vigilant go home! But if you knelt down and looked around for the enemy and then drank the water with your hand if you were careful, you made the final cut." Nine thousand seven hundred of them had been down and drank the water like a dog. There were three hundred left. That was God's remnant; that was God's faithful few. God did a lot more with three hundred totally committed people than he could have done with thirty two thousand mildly committed people. Do you know how that translates over to a church? Chances are we'll never have everybody in the church saying, "Great! Let's go and do this!" but if you have the faithful few, the committed core, who are following God, God is going to do great things through any church that has a faithful few. If you are in that group, praise God for you! I thank God for your faithfulness.

1. There were a few who were walking with Jesus

So how do you know if you are part of the remnant? There are three signs to know if you are in this remnant Jesus is talking about. Number one, you will be walking with Jesus. He says, "There are a few who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me." What that means is you are going to walk with Jesus in terms of purity. It says, "They will walk with me, dressed in white." That's a picture of purity. In the King James Version it says that their "garments will not be spotted." What that means is that you are hungry for holiness in your life. You are hungry to be pure before God. There is no such thing as a perfect person except Jesus Christ but the Old Testament says, "The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the earth to prove himself strong on behalf of them whose hearts are perfect for him." Not perfect hearts perfect for him That means you are walking with Jesus every day in purity.

When a surgeon enters an operating room, he is extra careful to work in a sterile environment. He scrubs; he wears a gown and a mask and garments that have been sterilized. He makes sure he is not infected with any kind of germs in any way. He not only wants to protect the patient from any germs he may introduce but any of you who have ever worked in the health care profession know there is another reason they work in a sterile environment. Doctors and nurses do not want to be infected themselves by any disease or bacteria the patient might have. The Bible says it's important for us to have that same kind of hatred for the sin of this world so we can walk in purity with Jesus. Can you say you really walk with Jesus in purity? That you want to walk side-by-side with Jesus in fellowship? The only way you can stay in fellowship with Jesus is to stay clean.

2. There were a few who were wearing the robe of righteousness

Number two it says, "You will be wearing the robe of righteousness." There are two kinds of righteousness in the Bible. There is the positional righteousness, who we are in Jesus Christ. We have been declared righteous. Righteousness has been imputed into us and when we come to Jesus Christ, he slips his "robe of righteousness" on us and it covers up the filthy rags of our self-righteousness. That's positional righteousness. Then, there is practical righteousness which just means day-by-day you try to do what's right. As I said a while ago, if you try to cover up your sins, you will not prosper. You need to confess them and forsake them.

When I was in college, I did a lot of preaching for youth revivals. Back in my college days in the 1970s it was the style to wear these all-white suits, white shoes, white vinyl belts, a navy blue shirt and a white tie? Do you remember those outfits? I saw some of you guys wearing them last week. I was doing a revival down in South Alabama and we were eating at a lady's house before the church service and I had on my white suit getting ready to preach. I don't remember exactly what we were having, but it was something like shrimp or fish or something that had red cocktail sauce. I just remember I picked up a piece of fish or a piece of shrimp or something and I was just about to eat it and a big drop of that cocktail sauce just went SPLAT! right on the lapel of that white suit. I did what most guys do and I just took my napkin and started trying to wipe it off. Of course you know what that did—it just rubbed it in and made it worse, but the lady who was serving the meal must have been reading Hints From Heloise or something, because she took a wet cloth and got it as clean as she could but there was still a red stain there because I had rubbed it in good. Then she took some flour and patted it on. WOW! It was completely white. Unless you got up real close you couldn't tell. The only problem was that night I got to preaching in this little country church with no air conditioning and the humidity was high and the longer I preached, the more it started flaking off. I noticed people were not looking at me they kept looking down there on my chest. They must have thought it was a miracle or something! Where did that red stain come from while he was preaching? The lesson is if you try to cover your sins, you will never prosper. Don't try to cover it up. Only the righteousness of Jesus Christ will stand the scrutiny of the world so you have to be wearing the robe of righteousness of Jesus to be one of the remnant.

3. There were a few who were winning the recognition of Jesus

Number three, you will win the recognition of Jesus if you are part of the remnant. "He who overcomes will be like them. He will be dressed in white. I will never erase his name from the Book of Life. I will acknowledge his name before my Father." Jesus says, "I will identify you. I will recognize you before my Father." Now that's very interesting about blotting out the name.

I told you earlier our friends in Russia do not believe in the security of the believer. They believe you can be saved and lose your salvation. When our pastors were visiting with us in February, we talked about this and this is one of the passages they asked me about. They said, "If it is not possible to lose your salvation, why does the Bible say Jesus will blot some names out of the Book of Life?" I shared with them the Bible doesn't say he will blot names out of the Book of Life. There is a Book of Life in heaven and as I have prayed about this, I asked the Holy Spirit to give me some insight into this because I didn't understand it for a long time. There is a Book of Life in heaven and everyone whose name is in the Lamb's Book of Life will be redeemed, saved.

Jesus said to those 70 disciples when they came back from casting out demons and healing the sick, and they were so excited about that he said, "Don't rejoice because demons are subject unto you but rejoice because your names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life." Nowhere in the Bible does it actually picture or use the verb describing God writing down the names in the Book of Life. Some people think, "When you get saved, God writes down your name." Is that what I think? The Bible never says it happens that way. It could be and I happen to believe the Bible says, "God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." Do you know what that means? That means God wants everyone to be saved. It could be everybody's name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life from the foundation of the world and it is only when that person commits the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit of saying, "No" to Jesus ultimately saying, "No, I reject you, Jesus." Then their names are blotted out. There are many other theologians who believe the same interpretation, that everyone's name is there, but when they reject Jesus, their name is removed.

Is your name written in the Lamb's Book of Life? Do you know that you know that you know that you know that you have been born again?" Jesus said, "If you will be faithful, I will recognize you before my Father. I'll profess you before my Father." I used to think it was only when you get saved, you said, "Yes, Jesus is my Lord," I think Jesus was confessing you to the Father. "That's one of mine." Have you ever thought about it? When we are finally caught up to be with Christ or when we die and go to be with Jesus in his presence, have you ever thought that may be the time Jesus will say to the Father, "Father, this is my child, David. Because he was faithful to me, I want to recognize him before you. I want to confess him before you because he confessed me before other people."

How can you tell if you're part of that faithful few, the remnant? You'll be walking daily in purity with Jesus you'll be wearing his robe of righteousness and one day you will win the recognition of Jesus.

OUTLINE

I. THE REPUTATION OF THE CHURCH

1. From the member's perspective: alive!
2. From the Master's perspective: dead!
Never confuse activity with anointing

II. THE REQUIREMENTS OF CHRIST

1. Rouse from your sleep (v. 2)
2. Remember your salvation (v. 3)
3. Repent of your sins (v. 3)

III. THE REMNANT OF CHRISTIANS

There were a few who were:

1. Walking with Jesus (v. 4)
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