

Introduction

Good morning. My name is Sue Sweeney and I'm part of the preaching team here at Catalyst.

So, I attended a Christian university up in Oklahoma for college. There was an attractive scholarship opportunity at the school for some friends I had in the Ministry and Theology program if they could get an internship in one of the local churches in our denomination in the city. Students were "placed" into churches by the professors in the program.

Some churches and ministry intern positions were more prestigious than others because some churches had more of a name- or better reputation than others. They were in nice buildings in more affluent parts of the city. They had lots of fun programs already going. There were constantly big events and Christian concerts which would draw people from all over the city. An intern in one of THESE churches wouldn't have to do much to earn their big internship scholarship. They could just plug in somewhere and then coast through the next few years, riding the coattails of that church's "success."

Some churches offering internships appeared to possess no real status at all, much less a good reputation in the city. These churches were often small and didn't have much going on. Or if they did have things going on, they weren't very glamorous- they were providing free childcare to mothers with low incomes or working to provide affordable housing. An internship at one of THESE churches promised difficult work in some of the less desirable parts of town. It was difficult work, but it was important work run by people who were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Churches in every city or town have reputations or a name. Some are known as the "big" church so there are lots of activities and things to do for individuals and families. Some churches are known for their "small" church feel- it's insular and "safe."

What does it mean for a church to have a good reputation? What makes a church successful? What do we measure? Is it membership? Is it the number of rear ends in the seats on a Sunday morning? How much money do the people bring in?

We can all think of a "successful" church that had a great reputation. That had a lot of good things going for it, even those who weren't into church thought it seemed like an important organization in the community- until it was rocked with scandal. In the news, we hear about The Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention and their struggles with allegations and evidence of abuse.

We know a church can look much better on the outside than it does on the inside. It's people can put up a good-looking front, but their behaviors and actions tell a different story. It's interesting to see how many churches today conflate the culture of God's kingdom that Jesus calls us to with the culture of our larger society. For example, It's easy for churches to get caught up in the culture of consumerism. We think of the church as a business or corporation and the people who attend church are the customers. We want to make the customers happy, so we try not to do anything to make them uncomfortable so they'll keep coming back and opening their wallets.

The truth is, the news Jesus brought us is good, but it's not meant to make us comfortable. Do we want to be well thought of or do we want to be faithful to Jesus? If we're really living the way

God has asked us to, then we can expect to be pretty uncomfortable at times. This is how the Spirit transforms us. And it's a good thing, I promise. As we sing together this morning, let's open our hearts to how God might transform us today.

Message:

We are currently in the season of Lent. This is a time the Church sets aside to prepare to celebrate Easter. It's where we take time to interrogate our hearts for sin, so that when we find ways that we have turned from God, we can confess that sin, repent and turn to God.

This morning, we're continuing our series on the letter to the seven churches at the beginning of the book of Revelation. It's called "Under Pressure" and we're listening to what Jesus had to say to those churches.

Those seven cities were all in the Roman province of Asia, what we call today Turkey. The churches in those seven cities all faced one important question: in a world that wants you to worship Caesar as Lord, who will you serve?

Jesus? Or Caesar?

Each church had a different response to "How do we stay faithful to Jesus in an unfaithful world?" And not all their responses were good. But for John, no matter where the churches were, no matter how they were struggling, they needed the same thing: a fresh revelation of Jesus.

That's what we see at the end of Chapter 1, just before John writes the letters:

When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. And standing in the middle of the lampstands was someone like the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire. His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth. And his face was like the sun in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said,

"Don't be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave. -- Revelation 1:12-18

This revelation of Jesus is what all seven of these churches need to be faithful to Jesus.

We began with the Church in Ephesus. As a church that had forsaken love for legalism, they needed to return to the one who is the heartbeat of the Church.

Then we went to Smyrna. This church was staying faithful to Jesus and suffering for it - they needed the Jesus who had conquered death.

Then, we learned how the church in Pergamum struggled to discern true teaching from false. They needed the Jesus whose very word is the truth.

Last week, Josh Mounce taught us about the church in Thyatira and Jesus is the one with eyes

of fire, the one who can help us discern the difference between what we want and what is truly good.

[Scripture Slide 1] Today, we're going to visit the church in the ancient city of Sardis. Tap over in your Bible app or turn to Revelation chapter 3, verses 1-6. If you picked up one of the Bibles in the back, you will find this on page _____. If you don't have a Bible of your own, you're welcome to keep this one.

Sardis should have had a reputation for being an impenetrable fortress. Of all the seven cities of Revelation, Sardis was the most fortified. It was built on a high cliff so the people of Sardis were sure they were safe from any imminent attack. It should have been basically unconquerable.

Turns out, not so much. The city was attacked and brought down not once, but twice! Once in 549 BCE and again in 195 BCE. In BOTH attacks, their enemies figured out how to scale the cliff and access the city through a small door in the wall that protected the city, at night while the city guard slept.

You can imagine what it was like. For years, the people of Sardis went to sleep every night feeling like they were perfectly safe, but while they slept, the enemy snuck in through a little door. When the people of Sardis woke up, they were under a surprise attack. What a blow to their city's reputation. The city should've been known as the unconquerable fortress instead of a city that fell asleep on the job.

So, by the 1st century, when Revelation was written, Sardis was still a somewhat significant city, but it had never regained the glory it enjoyed before these attacks. For the people of Sardis, their "best days" were behind them.

The letter to the people of the church in Sardis is the shortest of all the letters to the churches in Revelation. Unlike the other six churches, there are no outright accusations of heretical preaching, conflict with Jewish traditions, or bouts of savage persecution against the Christians.

To the casual observer in Sardis, everything seemed "fine." The members of the church were tolerated in a culture that did not really tolerate Christians and it's probably because they tried to make themselves a little more "acceptable" to the larger community. It's possible they were at least nominally involved in the Roman cult. Which, in their time, by societal standards, was the normal thing to do.

You could say they made some compromises.

This doesn't sound like such a bad thing, right? If you want your church to be successful, you have to go with the flow, right?

Wrong.

Let's read together

3 “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:

Jesus identifies himself as “him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.” Jesus actually interpreted this imagery for us at the end of Chapter 1 of Revelation himself: in 1:20, he said, “The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches,” -- Revelation 1:20 So Jesus wants the seven churches to know him as the one who has authority over the Church. The “seven spirits of God” meaning the Holy Spirit, as seven was considered a number meaning “perfect” or “complete.” The perfect and complete Spirit of God of whom we receive through Jesus. Let’s continue

“I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. -- Revelation 3:1-4

Jesus is drawing a connection here between the history of the city of Sardis and the current state of the Christian church in Sardis. For the church in Sardis to be faithful to Jesus meant practicing things that would make them outcasts in their culture, politically, economically, and socially. So, they only did a little bit of what God called them to do. They put their faith in this safe and compromised life they had made for themselves instead of putting their faith in God, and that was their weakness.

Because, as far as Jesus is concerned, there’s functionally NO difference between these Christians and the Roman pagans. The church in Sardis was NOT living the life Jesus called his people to live.

And Just like the city of Sardis, feeling safe sitting high on its cliff, church members were sleeping easy at night, comforted by a good reputation they had earned at the expense of following Jesus.

We also see this language about how some of those in the church have not “soiled” their clothes, but others had. The author isn’t saying that Jesus thought the people of Sardis- the Sardisians? - The Sardines- had an issue with dirty laundry. Some had taken the pure promises of God and “muddied” them with the dirt of the culture around them- a culture that asked the Sardines to live for themselves and not for God.

Theologian, N.T. Wright, describes the church in Sardis as “a church quietly drowning in its own inoffensiveness, unable to believe that its reputation for being alive is no longer deserved.” (*Revelation for Everyone, NT Wright, pg 31.*)

The author of this scripture also mentions that their name will be “blotted” out of the Book of Life.

When I was growing up in church and I heard this verse and others like it, I always imagined Jesus, up in heaven, with a giant book that had everyone’s name in it. He’s got a pencil and a big eraser. If you’re good, your name goes in the book, but if you do something bad, your name

gets erased.

Fortunately, I'm learning that perhaps I didn't have a very deep understanding of this biblical text at the time. That's ok.

Names written in the "Book of Life" was likely a reference to a tradition of ancient Greek cities. Before someone was put to death for a crime, their name would be removed from the "roster" of people who lived in the city. That way, the person's name wouldn't hurt the reputation of the city. It's almost like the person never lived there at all.

This reference would have likely reminded the Sardines that you can't just belong to a community in name, and behave in whatever way you want. There are always consequences for our behavior.

They had a reputation for being a part of the life of the city of Sardis, but Jesus warns them they only appear alive. They are actually dead inside. Or, asleep.

This message still rings clear today.

Catalyst, how do we make sure we don't appear like we're alive and thriving as a church, but move so far from the life given to us through Jesus that we actually become dead inside. Or asleep?

The world asks us to become more mainstream. To not make people uncomfortable by living lives that are filled with the Holy Spirit. Our culture tells us it's fine to be a Christian. It's socially acceptable to talk about Jesus and say we are trying to live like Jesus, as long as we don't take things too far. As long as we don't get too weird. As long as we don't rock the boat or challenge the status quo. If we're careful not to offend, we may find some "success" by the metrics our society uses. We may be a big church with lots of fun activities. But, if we do not put Jesus at the core of everything we do, we exchange our lives for death.

I'm not saying it's bad to be a big church with lots of activities. It's bad if Jesus isn't at the center and core of what you're doing.

In practical terms, I think it looks like this: When the culture here in America tells us to be afraid of the outsider, as a church, we must welcome them into our neighborhoods, schools, churches, and homes. That's not what the culture wants us to do, but we should do it anyway, because that is the life Jesus calls us to.

When our culture tells us to earn more money and buy more things so we can improve our social status, Jesus asks us to be generous with what we have and make room for others to enjoy what we have had the privilege of having because all things come from God. This is not what our culture wants us to do, but we should do it anyway, because it is the life Jesus calls us to.

Our pastor, JR, has said this from the beginning of the series. As a church, we have to be weird.

We have to be a weird church because that is what Jesus is calling us to.

If we are not living this way, we may have a good reputation as a fun, thriving church full of cool, energetic people, but we're really dead inside. We're actually asleep.

The Good News is, we can wake up! We can come back to life!

Jesus reminds the Sardines he's the one with the seven spirits. This reference here in Revelation is a call back to Genesis. The Hebrew word is ruach and the Greek word is pneuma. Ruach translates into English as "breath, wind, or spirit." The Greek is "pneuma" meaning a kind of life-giving spirit.

And then we see the number seven, which we know that to the ancient people, meant something was perfect or complete.

We have the perfect and complete Spirit of God to bring us back to life. To wake us up when we are asleep.

This is the message to the church in Sardis and it's also a message to us. God sent us the Holy Spirit to help us be the church God intended us to be. The Holy Spirit helps us understand what it means to be a part of a church where Jesus is truly at the center of who we are and all that we do.

How do you measure if your church is healthy? What is the metric that God uses?

Transformed lives. THIS is the metric of success God uses.

Church isn't a place where you're meant to be comfortable. In order to change, in order to experience transformation, you must be uncomfortable.

A church who follows Jesus is a people who are willing to live their lives in a completely different way.

A people who know that the risk of following Jesus is worth the reward.

But some of you might be thinking this morning, "I don't want to be uncomfortable!" So much of my life is uncomfortable already. If I could just sort of numbly get through it, I would consider that a success.

Is it success if you live your life numb to all that God intends for you? If you're numb, you're asleep. You're so asleep that you're actually, spiritually, dying.

Discomfort is the place where transformation can occur if we allow the Holy Spirit to make the changes in us. This is how we become alive in Christ Jesus.

So, what do we do? How do we make sure we have not soiled our clothes with the dirt of the culture outside the church?

At Catalyst, the way we recommend this is through Spiritual Practices. Outside, we have a brochure that can walk you through the steps of building these practices into your life. It's about making a little space for the Holy Spirit to transform you.

For me, times of spiritual transformation occur when I'm into reading the Bible. This is really a challenge for me to prioritize, but when I do, it makes a big difference. Opportunities like

attending service here on Sundays, preparing for these sermons and discussing scripture with other people in my C-Group are my main avenues to God's Word, but for me, I know I need more.

I'm slowly getting more into the practice of Lectio Divina, which is latin for "Divine Reading." You read the same passage of scripture over and over again and allow yourself moments for prayer and contemplation. I have a free Bible app on my phone and some of the translations have an audio component. I can just pull up the verse on my phone and listen to it being read to me while I'm in the car or while I have my earbuds in. This is especially powerful for me to do when I'm driving into work in the morning. It completely changes my whole attitude for the day. It helps me live more into the image of God.

Another spiritual practice I'm working on adding is fasting. The past couple of years, I've participated in the Lenten season with a fast of some kind. This year, I'm giving up online shopping - even just "window shopping" for clothes and accessories for myself. This doesn't seem like a big deal, but apparently it is for me because I'm realizing I spend a lot of time scrolling through my favorite stores online, looking at dresses, shoes, and earrings.

This seems pretty innocuous right? I'm not always buying everything I look at. I'm just looking...and I have a job where it's expected that I dress nicely, so I have lots of ways to justify it. However, I notice that slowly...the more I care about what I'm wearing and what people will think of me in what I'm wearing....the less I'm thinking about living my life like Jesus. Jesus cares about our hearts. The image of God is not necessarily about how I look, but about how I behave. How I act. Where my priorities are. Me wanting to dress and look a certain way is me listening to the culture instead of listening to Jesus. It's putting my faith in myself instead of God.

Remember, Theologian, N.T. Wright, describes the church in Sardis as "a church quietly drowning in its own inoffensiveness, unable to believe that its reputation for being alive is no longer deserved." (*Revelation for Everyone, NT Wright, pg 31.*)

Friends, I ask you, what reputation does Catalyst have? Are we going to be successful in the eyes of the society around us OR are we going to be successful in the eyes of God? Are we going to allow ourselves to drown in our own inoffensiveness in an effort to be more palatable to the culture around us? Are we going to let idolatry sneak in? Are we sleeping on Jesus?

A life of Christian faith is ALL or nothing. There is no room for compromises.

But God has promised to be with us every step of the way. Maybe we're dead right now, but we can come back to life. Maybe we've fallen asleep, but we can wake up. All we have to do is be willing. All you have to do is open your heart and come back to Jesus.

Communion

[Communion Slide]

Examen

1. Do you know the life Jesus is calling you to or have you been "overconfident" and not relying on the spirit to reveal this life Jesus has called you to?

Prayer

Blessing

The author closes each letter with a blessing, so Catalyst, I offer you the same blessing that was offered to the church in Sardis in Revelation chapter 3: 5-6:

If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” -- Revelation 3:5-6

Catalyst, let us be awake, stay unsoiled, and conquer! Go in the grace and peace of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Have a great week. Stay awake!