

Advent Mid-Week 1: December 4, 2019
“The Dead Church”

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text for this evening are the two letters in Revelation first written to the churches of Sardis and Laodicea.

As we walk through this time of Advent, we will spend our time of preparation for our Lord by looking at the letters to the churches in Revelation. There has been much talk in recent years around the synod about the health of churches. What does it mean to be a healthy church, a dying church or a dead church? Just where do we stand both as a church and as individuals? The Lord has much to say about the health or lack thereof when it comes to the church, and we are going to hear His words towards 7 specific churches. Do not be mistaken however, these letters have just as much to say today as they did when they were first written. Jesus says, ***“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”***¹ We have four weeks to comb through these letters and we are going to look at the churches that are dead, then those that are dying, and finally we will end with those that are living.

We begin tonight with the dead churches. There are two churches in this category, and these two churches receive the harshest condemnations from the Lord: Sardis and Laodicea. To diagnose a problem, one must know all the facts. Here is what we know about these two specific localities. Sardis was 50 miles northeast of Ephesus and, at one time, was one of the most important and powerful cities of the Mediterranean world. This would change under the Roman Empire. Sardis had lost most of its world renown, and was reduced to a relic of the past. It lived on its ancient prestige, rather than its suitability to present conditions. While the church here had a good reputation, the people now had little or no faith. The inhabitants of the city now could only take pride in the past. When it came to worldly fame and culture, their present life was nothing but an empty shell of its lost glory.

Jesus labels this church as dead, but what makes it dead? In Matthew, Jesus continually commands His church, His followers, to keep watch. In chapters 24 and 25 in Matthew Jesus continually connects endurance and survival with the key

¹ Revelation 3:6

aspect of constantly keeping watch. The opposite of that, of course, is those who fail to keep watch are, as we heard on Sunday, are sleeping, just like the dead. A bit of history adds to the harsh, embarrassing nature of these words, as the city of Sardis was taken captive on two separate accounts due to their defenders not being vigilant in their watching.

So what was going on in Sardis? Jesus clarifies. These people were outwardly giving the appearance that they were Christian. They were seeming to do the right things. They were performing the right rituals of godly pretense, but they had completely lost the faith and their heart toward Christ. They purported to be alive, but they were in a state of carelessness, lethargy, and inactivity. If they remained unrepentant, their apathy would end them in spiritual and eternal death. What a harsh wake-up call by our Lord.

The only harsher letter was written to the other dead church: Laodicea. This city's name literally means "the old fortress." This city was in the southwestern part of the Phrygia and on the juncture of two important trade routes. Along one of the routes, were five of the seven churches John addresses in Revelation. Under the Roman Empire, this city fared very well. It was the wealthiest city in Phrygia. It was a fine purveyor of black wool and woven garments, but most notably it was known for its medical school. From that medical school came two of the best known medicinal ointments for the eyes and the ears. The credit was not given to the Triune God, however, the people of the city worshiped Men Carou, the god of healing, who was later identified as Zeus.

Among all the great things for which this city was known, when it came to matters of faith, they had the same problem as Sardis. They were apathetic at best. The church lived primarily for wealth and selfish desires. Like the words of Zephaniah, these people would sit and get drunk on the dregs of wine and had neither anger nor enthusiasm towards God. They felt, "Well, after all, God is God and He is always there. What I do ultimately does not matter. Who cares?" All the plans and hopes of the people were self-centered. Faith and love towards God in a life of service and devotion, was secondary at best. Jesus calls them lukewarm, and as such, He will spit them out of His mouth. They are utterly distasteful to Him.

So these are the examples of the dead churches. The Divine Diagnosis of being dead centers on faith. It has nothing to do with how many butts are in the pews or bills are in the plate. The health of a church is not measured by nickels and noses. The dead church is apathetic. Just like the dead, there is stillness, and the cold motionless non-love of rigor mortis. A dead faith manifests itself in frozen hearts, petrified hands, and solid lips.

If we learn and remember anything from these churches it is that apathy toward God's Word of stinging Law and sweet comforting Gospel is utterly distasteful towards God and God will not tolerate it. While Christ in patience forgives a Christian who sins 70 times 7, those who live in contrition and repentance looking to God for mercy, the Lord does not tolerate a life of imagined self-sufficiency. He does not stand for those who imagine they need no repentance or forgiveness. To warn the church of such a final judgment, the Lord Jesus Christ speaks a terrifying word of Law. And unless you want to call Jesus a liar, it is a word that should cut us all to the core. To be apathetic towards God and His Church is to be in danger of eternal death!

For as hard as these letters are to hear, they are needed. But what is the purpose? The word of severe judgement is to shake the churches, shake us, to repentance; to see our sin, our apathy, our failure and confess before God that we truly are poor and miserable. This is not however, to be left there. The very idea is discipline. The Lord disciplines those whom He loves, just as a loving father does his wayward child. Sometimes the actions seem harsh and foreboding, but the goal is not casting them out; the very goal is repentance, a turning 180 degrees around. Faith lays hold of forgiveness and manifests itself in works of love, ***"You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."***²

² Matthew 7:16-21

This is the very purpose of every step laid out in Matthew 18. Discipline whether done by God, the church, or in the household has only one purpose: full restoration in the Father's love. Forgiveness is the aim, and His ways are not the same as the worlds. They look strange, and there is a reason for that; do you trust in your sight or His; or reason or His?

We could come up with many other ways to save the human race from sin. I don't think anyone of us would have come up with God becoming a man to die for His own creation. Why should He have to suffer for the evil works of His creation? How can God can be the person of Jesus? How does it make sense that the bloody sacrifice of the baby born Away in the Manger would be for all the people? How can the wooden manger contain the Word of God made flesh? How can the wooden cross proclaim anything other than death? How can the Word of God be, even now, *“living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”*³

John knows the words of the prophet Isaiah, and Isaiah has already told us, *“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn*

³ Hebrews 4:12–13

shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”⁴

The everlasting sign of God is His Son, who was crucified and risen for you. The cross is a sign, showing just how serious the Lord is when He calls His people to come to repentance and believe the Good News of THE Gospel, His Gospel. He has gone out of His way to do so. He left the friendly confines of heaven and located Himself in the flesh. He confined Himself to a human body to suffer the reproach, bear the guilt of sin, and die on the cross.

Where we are dead and apathetic, because after all, Ephesians 2 tells us we are dead in our sins, and what does a dead person really want to do? We are dead and Christ came to give us life. Where we are apathetic, Jesus was enthusiastic. He lovingly set His face to the cross and would not be deterred. There was no carelessness for you. He fervently died for you. He eagerly gave His life. And with great passion, He lovingly feeds you. He, with zealous devotion, washed you and made you His own. With burning Law and cooling Gospel, He speaks to you and fills your ears, your hearts and minds. With loving care, He carefully gives the dead life, His life, as He places into your apathetic hands the strength and excitement of His death in, with, and under bread and wine.

The church without Jesus and His word is dead, but with Jesus, with the Holy Spirit, it is living and active. The church, His body, bears the life of Him who died and gave it life. As Jesus said, ***“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”***⁵

“Defend Thy truth, O God, and stay
 This evil generation;
 And from the error of its way
 Keep Thine own congregation.
 The wicked everywhere abound
 And would Thy little flock confound;
 But Thou are our salvation.”⁶ Amen.

⁴ Isaiah 55:6–13

⁵ Revelation 3:6

⁶ O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold TLH 260:6

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.