

The Letters to the Seven Churches, Part V- *The Walking Dead*

Call to Worship: Psalm 27:1-4

Hymn #492- *Take My Life, and Let it Be Consecrated*

1st Scripture: Matthew 16:13-28

Hymn #35 (supp)- *Cleanse Me*

2nd Scripture: Revelation 3:1-6

Hymn #27 (supp)- *Be Thou My Vision*

Introduction:

In the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 11, we are told of a situation that had taken place when our Lord grew hungry on His two mile journey from Bethany up to Jerusalem. As He neared Jerusalem, from afar, He could see a fig tree with leaves, indicating that figs were on it, even though it was not really the season for figs. And so, He went to see if perhaps He could find something on it to eat to satisfy His hunger. But when He reached the tree, He found nothing on it but leaves. From a distance, and from every outward standpoint, the tree presented itself as having fruit to offer, but upon getting a closer look, it proved to be a deception and a sham, and so Jesus cursed the fig tree, and soon after, it began to dry up and wither away.

Now, lest we assume that our Lord, like us, was simply frustrated because His hunger was denied; and lest we assume that this event was all about “deceptive fig trees,” we find our Lord cleansing the temple of the money changers and thieves, immediately after this. For this fig tree was a picture of the religious state of Israel. It had every outward appearance of religion; it had all of the ceremonial laws in place and the sacrifices were in motion; from the standpoint of the world and the Israelite people, Judaism was a God-honoring religion. And yet, upon closer examination; upon bringing the whole system and all of its white-washed leaders up to the real scrutiny of the Scriptures, one would have to say that the leaves looked nice and green, but the fruit was non-existent. It was a plastic system of rituals; it was a well ordered system, saturated with a people who sought to draw near to God with their *lips*, while their *hearts* were far from Him. And so, like the fig tree, Israel, which had the appearance of authentic religion without any true fruit, was on the verge of being cursed. And in AD 70, when the temple was destroyed, never to be rebuilt again, that curse, which was sealed at the crucifixion of Christ, met its ultimate destination and fulfillment.

But this reality; this reality of a God and Creator, who is after a religion that begins, continues and ends in the heart; this reality of a God who looks upon religious traditions and plastic rituals as filthy rags; this reality of a God who is after a people who will worship Him in spirit (in sincerity of soul) and in truth (in accordance with the precepts and principles given in His Word), is a reality that makes its way right into the life of every local church.

What a fearful thing to have all of the wonderful, colorful, airy, trimmings of religion...to have these, assuming the whole time that God is pleased with you...while really being a lifeless, God-dishonoring, body of people at the same time. What a sad reality to know that it is possible to have the appearance of moving away from the condemned world of Sodom and Gomorrah with Lot, while truly having your heart fixed in those hell-bound cities, soon to be confirmed by a simple turning of the head to look back.

Such was indeed the case with the church of Sardis, and sadly, therefore, such is the case for local churches throughout all ages. To think you have it; to think that the smile of God is shining down upon you the whole time, when you are on the verge of being forever cursed...that is a horrible; perhaps even a *most* horrible reality! “Well, I was born and raised in a Christian home. Well, I made a profession of faith and was baptized and I have been a member of the church for a hundred years.” God can make such people out of stones. Where is the fruit? Where is the fruit? Where is the fruit?

I. An Historical Background of Sardis

William Hendriksen states, “Sardis, the impregnable, was situated upon a nearly inaccessible hill, overseer of the Hermus Valley, and in ancient times the proud capital of Lydia. Its people were arrogant, over-confident. They were sure—too sure, alas!—that no-one could scale this hill with its perpendicular sides. There was only one point of access: a very narrow neck of land toward the south and this could easily be fortified. But the enemy came, in 549 BC and again in 218 BC, and...took Sardis. One unobserved, unguarded weak point, an oblique crack in the rockwall, the one chance in a thousand for a night attack by skilful mountain-climbers, was all that was necessary to deal a crushing blow to the arrogance of the overconfident citizens of this proud capital. The hill upon which Sardis stood was too small for a

growing city. Therefore the ancient Sardis, the acropolis, began to be deserted and a new city arose in its vicinity. When the Apocalypse was written, Sardis was facing decay, a slow but sure death. In the year AD 17 the city was partly destroyed by an earthquake. Thus, again and again, the self-satisfied and boastful inhabitants of Sardis had seen destruction coming upon them ‘as a thief in the night’, most suddenly and unexpectedly.”

II. Christ’s Self-Designation

“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars...’” (vs. 1a).

Here, our Lord presents Himself to the church in Sardis in two ways:

1) He is the One who has *the seven Spirits of God*. In chapter one, verse 4, we saw that One of the Three Persons of the God Head, who offered a salutation of grace and peace to the seven churches of Asia, was described as, “the seven Spirits who are before [the Father’s] throne.” And there, we considered that this was a reference to the perfect, divine, omniscience, which is attributed to the Holy Spirit, who contains every ounce of life and power, necessary for the progress of the churches. When the Holy Spirit leaves the church, the word “Ichabod” (“The glory has departed from Israel”) is etched into the soul of that church, because it becomes lifeless and dead. But when the Holy Spirit is actively moving and working in the church; when there is an ongoing supply of oil to be contributed to the lampstand, the church yet has life and shines for the glory of God in Christ.

Here, our Lord would have this “nearly dead” church understand that it was within His power to rejuvenate and once again send life into her heart. The One who sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost; the One who sends the Comforter and the embodiment of all conviction and grace into His churches (John 16), to give them life and power to bear light for the glory of God, remains the Sender of this Gift at all times. And though this church had all but lost that power, should they respond to His exhortation accordingly, He could freely grant them the blessed power and grace they once had, when the Spirit was at work there in times past. The years that the locust’s had eaten away could be restored! But on the contrary, should they remain secularized and in a

state of complacency and stagnancy with respect to the Gospel, He could also remove any remaining influence of the Holy Spirit, and thereby, utterly cast away even the little light that remained. In verse 4, we see that a “few” remained, who carried the torch of that nearly dead church, but even this light would be taken away, should they remain as they presently were.

2) He is the One who has *the seven stars*. Here, our Lord uses the same self-designation that He had used when He addressed the church at Ephesus (2:1). And again, He would likewise remind the church at Sardis that this overly confident and seemingly secure church, functioned in the very palm of His hand. The life of this church was under His sovereign control and power, and He could easily shatter their self-confidence and utterly cast them aside in a heartbeat, should He so choose to let the guillotine of His judgment fall down upon them. They needed to be reminded, even as the *city* of Sardis needed to be reminded in the past, that unexpected judgment could come at any moment, even for a city that seemed untouchably secure at the top of a high hill. “Don’t let the foolish, well documented presumption of the cities past, which was rewarded with destruction on at least two occasions, remain settled in the heart of the church, as if all of your present confidence and security could not be utterly shattered in a moment, by the One who has you in the very palm of His hand, and the One who often comes in judgment, unexpectedly and instantly, like a thief in the night (vs. 3).” Could this speak words of caution to the churches of the well armed, overly confident and secure United States of America? Could it be that what happened on September 11th, was even but a small reminder of how penetrable we really are...something that ought to have caused us to repent of our wicked and idolatrous ways as a nation? You see, we may have a million nuclear bombs and all manner of technology and satellite defense systems and etc, but ultimately, brethren, “the shields of the earth belong to our God!” And He who is able to lift up and secure a primitive, feeble Israel, can also bring down and destroy an advanced, high tech, towering Babylon...and that, in but a few short moments.

And so, our Lord designates Himself as the One who has the all powerful, life giving Spirit and the seven stars.

III. Christ's Commendations

“You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy” (vs. 4).

Here our Lord's sole commendation of this church is directed toward a *few* within the body, who have stood firm in the Gospel, refusing to defile their garments. Most in the church have become entirely secularized, enjoining themselves to the world and its heathen practices. They were, what we might call, *nominal* Christians; Christians in name only, who sought benefit from the redemptive aspects of Christ's death, but refused to submit to His Lordship. However, even in that church, the leaven did not reach all, for a few had remained faithful and undefiled. There were a few “Lots” in the midst of Sodom and Gomorrah. While the temptation to compromise was probably overwhelmingly strong, these “few” continued to bring to mind the reality of the coming glory for the redeemed and judgment for the wicked.

James tells us in James 1:27, “Pure and undefiled religion (a religion bearing unspotted and pure garments) before God and the Father (according to God's design and will) is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.” James gives us both the “love” and the “holy living” aspect of authentic Christianity. He gives us both sides of the coin for true religion: namely, the need to look out for and consider the needs of others, and to strive to walk in accordance with the commands of Christ. Ephesus had the latter of these two marks, but lacked the former. Pergamos and Thyatira had the former of these two marks, but lacked the latter. And Sardis (along with Laodicea, as we will soon see) lacked both, leaving their garments wholly defiled. But there were a few in Sardis whose backs were to the world, whose hearts were set upon Christ, and who were living sacrificially for the sake of the Gospel, in keeping with a thankful heart that has been touched by the amazing grace of God!

And for this reason, Christ tells the *few*, who have not defiled their garments; whose religion was a religion of the heart (dedicated to sincere love for and service to Christ), that because they have endured the temptation to compromise with the world and to embrace the enticements of the whore of Babylon, they would walk with Christ in white, for they are worthy. In the end, those who war against the lusts of the flesh now; those who deny the wicked desires of the world and the flesh, will never, ever regret it. Their time of true and lasting joy will come.

They will enjoy the eternal enrichment of walking in righteous fellowship with Christ! For they have proven themselves worthy...not to earn their salvation, but to wear those garments, because, having been saved by the grace of Christ alone, they have born the God-honoring Biblical fruit, which evidences a proper reception of the grace of God. In His first Epistle, John puts it this way, in 1 John 3:1-3, “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”

There were indeed a few in Sardis, who evidenced this *hope in them*.

IV. Christ’s Word of Rebuke

“I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (vs. 1b).

Wow! So few words, but sums up the matter quite clearly, doesn’t it? Notice, there is no emphasis given in this letter, concerning any persecution or even a threat of false doctrine seeking to make its way into the church of Sardis. There is no record of any opposition or contradictory forces coming against the church. And could that be because there was very little Gospel threat there with which to contend? Why should the enemy focus a lot of attention toward coming against a church that was happily snuffing out its own light, while thinking all was well at the same time? Is that not the ultimate deception? If the devil can numb a church of all of its Gospel influence *from the inside*, and convince that church that all is well and great at the same time, he needs to do little more. There are “bigger fish to fry” in places like Philadelphia, Smyrna and Thyatira.

The church at Sardis had a “name”; they thought that they were functioning well as a living and active church. They probably gained the respect of the surrounding community. They probably gained the respect of their political leaders...because the church was “nominal” (in “name” only) and had become pretty much totally secularized. They looked like the world. They lived like the world. They dressed like the world. They shared the world’s ideals and

desires. They fit in so well, and they wrapped all of their worldliness in a nice, neat, little Christian bow! And they were proud of that. They took pride in the fact that there was very little contention or difficulty in the life of the church (After all, when the world creeps into the church, there are no striking differences that would lead to trials, tribulations and conflicts). By every outward standpoint, they seemed untouchable. Other churches probably thought, “Wow, if only we could be like the church at Sardis!” They probably had a large number of members on their rolls (a first century “Mega-church”). By example, they probably even authored the first, “How to grow your church exponentially” book. They had a name! They had it all together...at least, that is how it looked at the level of the surface.

But when brought up to the standard of Scripture; when brought before the principles of God’s Word; underneath it all, from the standpoint of Christ, they were as dead. You see, often times, the “popularity” and the “number one best seller” mindset is the mindset of compromise and it scoops up great majorities of supporters at the expense of truth and biblical principle. You see brethren, if we wanted to make this church bigger; if we wanted to secure a several million dollar budget, we could simply adopt the Robert Schuler method of growing your church, and we will probably do real well. We would sacrifice truth and the Holy Spirit and pleasing Christ, but we could really prosper from the world’s standpoint. Pastor Doug and I could probably even get our own TV show and write all sorts of good, fluffy so-called “Christian books.”

Here is the recipe: Let’s go out into the neighborhood here and ask everyone, *what they would like to see* in a church. And let’s pool it all together, and build according to the desire of the majority. And let’s find out what they don’t like, and let’s get rid of it. Ok, so, no one likes to sit and listen to lengthy sermons anymore, so, let’s have 15 minute homilies, and oh, let’s leave out all of that “sin and hell” stuff, because no one wants to hear that they are a sinner, having the need to repent and etc. And then, let’s simply tell everyone that Christ died for them, and that He can give them their “best life now.” Let’s install Sony Play Stations and Ipod docks in the back of the pews; let’s add a few candy and soda machines in the foyer; let’s have big Super Bowl Sunday and World Series parties right here in the sanctuary—I’ll bring the pop corn; let’s pull out these pews back here and add a five piece alternative band; me—starting next week, I will throw on a pair of casual shorts with an Hawaiian shirt; we can turn the down stairs into a bowling alley; let’s get rid of the Prayer Meeting (who wants to sit around and listen to

people pray?) and replace it with various social events; and let's sell a bunch of shirts that say cool things like, "Christ is my home boy" and "Be cool, be a Christian"; and let's have dance shows and drama plays and skits, periodically on Sundays...you know, let's just make everything more palpable to the world. And furthermore, let's forget all traditional hymns and all theologically sound hymns, and just chant the same line over and over a thousand times, until we work ourselves up into a spiritual frenzy. Let's just sing over and over, something like, "God loves everyone and longs for us to believe." Let's build a "man-centered" church. Then we'll gain a "name." We will have lots of money to do great things. We can send out missionaries to help build these wonderful churches. The world will love us! And let's just wrap all of this in a big bow that says "Jesus loves you!" What a blasphemous thing to compromise the holiness and truth of Christ by looking to the world to formulate our Christianity, when God is after a people who will pursue holiness; who will desire to be more like Christ, who will worship Him in spirit and in truth! Such churches are far more dead than they realize, and in the end, all of the wood, hay and stubble of such compromising ministries, will be burned by the divine testing of fire!

The church at Sardis; the "disco church" thought it had a name, but it was dead.

V. Christ's Solution

"Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent" (vs. 2-3a).

"Get your head out of the sand of the world, and concentrate on what really matters. Run the race of faith that I have called you to run. Fix your attention on Christ and on winning the race." "Be watchful." "Pray, pray, pray and get into the meat of the Word. Live for My glory and not your own. One who is running a race looks not to the left or the right...rather, he is wholly concerned with finishing well; with winning and obtaining the prize. You cannot have the best of both worlds; you cannot drink from the fat of the world and the cup of Christ at the same time. Bear the cross! Head for the crucifixion! Die daily to this life! Give up what you cannot keep to gain what you cannot lose!"

“Strengthen what little remains, before that dies also. There is a little light still flickering. Trim the wick, add some oil, and improve upon your Gospel witness. Improve upon your sacrificial love toward one another. Improve upon your pursuit of holiness. For, I have not found your works perfect before God. Even your best *present* efforts are defiled and come with worldly motivations. Get it together. Take a spiritual inventory according to My Word, and start making changes. Remember how you started out. Remember how you lovingly and willingly received the Gospel; remember the way in which you originally responded to it, when it was the center of your very life and world. Hold fast to that! Go back, repent, return to your first works, when you, as a church, died with Me, so that you might live for Me. Put away the nonsense. Get back to the basics and serve Me in spirit and in truth. Replace your shaky, unreliable self-confidence with a God-confidence. Stop settling for the status quo and press forward! Be watchful; consider My coming, and be ready; Be ready by doing what I call you to do, expending your life for the sake of the Kingdom of God and My glory!”

VI. Christ’s Warning

“Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you” (vs. 3b).

At some point, the Lord Jesus would come to them, and they would have to be ready to give an account. And there will be no warning then...the warning comes now. If they fail to heed this warning, He would come to them at an hour that they least expect, and at that point they will realize that all that they have sacrificed concerning the Kingdom of God and Christ, in order to maintain a footing in the world; whatever was gained in this world, would be seen for the temporal, worthless, shallow, empty dung that it truly is.

You see, friends, the way to be ready; the way to be ready for Christ’s coming, be it His final coming or His coming to close out your life in this world, is to be steadfast in His Word; to be steadfast in prayer (maintaining daily, consistent communion with Christ); to be steadfast in committing your life to serving Him (to loving His sheep and seeking the lost), and to keep yourself unspotted from the world. The world has nothing to offer you in the long run. All it gives is painted, glossy, different shapes of condensed dust and a bag full of lustful trinkets that

appeal to your flesh, but offer no eternal salvation. And, upon considering the brevity and the fragility of life, I ask you this morning, “What would it profit you if you gained the whole, entire world, all at the expense of your very soul?” “And what would you give in exchange for your soul?” Your days are numbered. You have an appointment with the living God, and you must and will keep it *on time*. But will you be ready? Will you be found truly in Christ and in Christ alone, evidenced by a life of investing all that He has put into your hands and your talents, for His glory? Friends, that is life! Watch, pray, be ready, for you know not what day or hour He will come! And if you are indeed in Christ, and if you run the race, laying aside all of the distractions that this world has to offer and the sin that so easily entangles you, consider the promises granted to such overcomers:

VII. Christ’s Promises to Those Who Overcome

“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (vs. 5).

The persevering, battling, overcoming Christian shall be clothed in white garments. He will stand clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and be accepted in Christ’s glorious heaven, where righteousness alone dwells. Those who fight for purity and faithfulness now in this life; those who stay fixed on the straight and narrow way, putting sin to death by the grace of Christ; those who remain with their backs to the world, having set their sights on the heavenly reward, will make it home, and they will stand in the presence of God and His Christ forever, undefiled in spite of their past sins, because all of it has been paid for in the atonement of Christ. Their names will never be blotted out of the Book of life. In the first century, when you died, your name was blotted out of the register of the living. You were no longer a part of that society because you were no longer among the living. In heaven, no such thing will ever happen. There will be no end to the lives of all who go there. Their names will be eternally secured, as it were, in the Book of life (in the “Book of the Living”).

And Christ Himself will confess their names before His Father and before the heavenly angels. Your name will be known *in a personal way* by Christ, as one of His true and sincere

servants; as one who truly knew Him and walked with Him in this life, and He, the Lord Jesus Christ and the King of Glory, will gladly (without any reluctance), confess you before all who are present...as His very own! He knows His own by name. This is the exact opposite of what will happen to those who will claim that they have known Christ in this life, but were really workers of lawlessness, who will say then, “Lord, Lord...”, only to hear in response, “Depart from Me, I never knew you.” Friends, let me assure you, that the greatest privilege ever experienced, has yet to come, from our standpoint. The greatest privilege will be granted those who stand before Christ one day, only to hear the words, “Brother so-and-so/Sister so-and-so, well done thou good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord.” Let it be the all consuming desire of our hearts to hear those precious words from the mouth of our King, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Jesus Christ!

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (vs. 6).

AMEN!!!

Benediction: Ephesians 3:14-21