

We are working our way through Jesus' messages to seven different churches that existed toward the end of the first century AD. The exalted and reigning Saviour is speaking, and he addresses each church - pointing out strengths and weaknesses that he sees and giving exhortations according to the need of each church. These messages have been preserved in the book of Revelation so that throughout the ages churches and Christians could consider themselves in the light of what Christ said to these seven churches. We have come to Jesus's message to the church at Sardis.

In each case Jesus introduces himself and most of the time he mentions are few of the things that John saw in the vision of the exalted Christ recorded in chapter 1. In this case Jesus says, "The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." The seven spirits of God refer to the Holy Spirit. This expression comes from near the beginning of the whole book of Revelation where John writes, "Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings on earth." The phrase "seven spirits who are before his throne" is a reference to the Holy Spirit. Seven is the number of fullness and so referring to seven spirits points to the fullness of the Holy Spirit. In our text Jesus presents himself as the one who gives the Holy Spirit. We are to recall the earlier teaching of the NT where the ascended and victorious Christ pours out the Holy Spirit upon the church.

The seven stars refer to the angels of the seven churches. They are either angels assigned to the specific churches or they are the leaders of each of the churches. In any case, Jesus is addressing the churches through these angels. So Jesus presents the churches as **his** churches. "The word of him who **has** the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." Jesus is the dispenser of the Holy Spirit to his church.

Jesus begins his message to the church at Sardis with a most serious criticism. "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead." Those are disturbing words. That such a thing is possible should cause us to tremble. There is no more important distinction between human beings than the distinction between those who are saved and those who are not. This is the division between those who are going to heaven and those who are going to hell. This is the division between eternal life and eternal death. And Jesus is saying here that the church at Sardis had the reputation of being alive while it was really dead. That such a thing is possible is terrifying. But it mentioned more often in the Bible.

Jesus, for instance, said in Matthew 7:21-23 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven. On that day many will say to me. 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name?' And then will I declare to them, I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" Jesus says that there are many who fully expect to be welcomed into heaven, who will instead here those awful words, "Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

Now it appears that the church of Sardis was not quite dead, for Jesus goes on to say, "Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my

God.” This was a church in a precarious but not a hopeless state. When Jesus says that they were dead he meant that they were about to die. They were barely alive. They were in danger of dying. But Jesus has the solution for them, and he is telling them of it in this message.

Now you might wonder about how this fits with the biblical teaching that once a person is saved, God will not allow them to fall away. Jesus, for instance, in John 10:28 teaches that not one of his sheep will perish because no one will be able to snatch them out of his hand. How does that fit with Jesus’ warning in our text that the believers at Sardis were barely alive and in danger of dying?

This is one of the many tensions in Scripture which are rooted in the relationship between God’s sovereignty and our responsibility. From the perspective of God’s sovereignty in salvation, those whom God has chosen for salvation will certainly be saved. God will keep them from falling away. But we do not know with absolute certainty who those people are. The reality is that there are some who show signs of spiritual life who do fall away from the Lord. And the Bible addresses that reality in verses like our text where Jesus warns the church in Sardis that it is about to die.

The reality is that if we are not seriously engaged in living for Christ it is very dangerous to take comfort in the truth that Jesus keeps his people from falling away. The only people who can legitimately take comfort in the truth that Jesus preserves his people are those who are persevering in their walk with the Lord. The biblical truth that applies to those who are not serious about living for Christ are the warnings about falling away. The fact is that the Bible does give serious warnings against falling away - and the fact that God will preserve his elect does not make those warnings irrelevant for us. If we are half-hearted in fighting sin and striving to please God, we are misusing Scripture if we take comfort in the fact that God keeps his elect from falling away.

Jesus says to the church at Sardis, “I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.” So there are works of some sort going on, but they are not complete. Something is missing. We can figure out what Jesus means by saying that their works were not complete by considering what he tells them to do. He tells them to “wake up” which means that they sleeping. He tells them to strengthen what remains which means that they were weak. He tells them that they were about to die which means that they were half dead. Later on Jesus mentions that there were a few in the congregation who had not soiled their garments, which means that the rest had soiled their garments. This imagery of soiled garments refers to dabbling in sin. Jude 23 refers to a “garment stained by the flesh.” James 1:27 tells believers to keep themselves, “unstained from the world.”

So we get a pretty good idea of what Jesus means by uncomplete works in the sight of God. Drowsiness rather than alertness in Christian living. Weakness rather than strength. Half-dead rather than fully alive. A life stained with worldliness rather than serious effort in keeping unstained from the world.

But how do we distinguish this from healthy Christians who all struggle with remaining sin? That is a vital question. The healthiest Christians still have lots of sins in their lives. Their hope is not in their obedience, but

in Jesus' perfect righteousness. What is the difference between that kind of person and the people that Jesus is describing in our text?

Healthy Christians are already doing what Jesus tells the half dead Christians to do in these verses. They do not act like people who are half dead spiritually. They are lively in their efforts to serve the Lord. They are alert and engaged rather than sluggish and sleepy. There are signs of strength in their Christian walk rather than only weakness.

Verse 3 mentions some other things that Jesus tells the half dead Christians of Sardis to do which is also what healthy Christians do. Jesus says "Remember ... what you have received and heard." The healthy Christians remember the gospel. They remember the word of God and it is a living reality in their lives. Jesus continues "Keep it, and repent." In Luke 11:28 Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" And repentance. Repentance is an ongoing reality in their lives. Healthy Christians still sin, but they are constantly confessing sin and repenting of it. They are engaged in the life of putting off sin and putting on righteousness. This is a living and ongoing reality in their lives.

So Jesus is addressing a church which is about to die, and he tells the members of that church to wake up, to strengthen what remains, to remember what they had received ... to keep the word of God and to repent.

And we are all called to examine our lives in the light of his warning and make sure that we are living the kind of life that can be described as awake and alive with ongoing repentance.

The gospel is tremendously encouraging, and it is for sinners not the righteous. It is the good news that Jesus has provided the way for us to be forgiven all our sins and fully accepted by God for his sake. But clearly there is no comfort for those who are not being changed by that same gospel. Clearly Jesus expects the saved to be fully engaged in the life that he saves us to live. And if we are passionate about all kinds of other things and half asleep and half dead when it comes to living for Jesus then we had better think very seriously about what Jesus says to the church at Sardis, "You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

Jesus then gives a warning to the barely alive members of the church at Sardis. "If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you." Now the coming that Jesus is referring to here is probably not his final coming at the end of the age, although that is certainly in the background because it is always in the background. But probably Jesus is referring to some kind of judgment that will take place before the end. It is significant that Jesus says that he will come **against** them if they do not repent. That may well be some punishment or judgment that comes in his wrath – something that foreshadows the final judgment. But whatever it is exactly, what is clear is that the proper posture for all Christians is to be awake and alert and ready for Jesus' coming. There are many passages that tell us that Jesus shall come like a thief in the night and that we are always to be ready for his coming.

Jesus' words in Matthew 24:45-46 give the clearest description of what it means to be ready. ⁴⁵"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes." The way to be ready – the way to be watchful – is to be busy serving Jesus. To be half-dead and sleepy Christians is to be unprepared for the Jesus' coming which will be like a thief in the night.

It is quite striking how often this warning to be ready for Jesus' return appears in the NT. It is the message of the parable of the ten virgins. It is the message of the passage from Matthew 24 I just quoted. Paul mentions it a number of times in his writings and so does Peter. The warning to be watchful so as to be ready for Christ's return is repeated a number of times in the NT which underscores its importance.

And the way to be ready is to be engaged in living for Jesus in our lives. It is to live with the awareness that Jesus could return at any moment. And it is the opposite of being careless about sin and living for this life without reference to God. Living this life is important, but only if we are seeking to please God in every aspect of our lives.

But not everyone in the church of Sardis was half-dead. In verse 4 Jesus says, "Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy." The people Jesus commends are described as not having soiled their garments. Let's look at this image a little more closely. This image of soiled garments conveys the idea that sin makes us dirty. Sin is unclean. It defiles us. It makes us unclean. I have already quoted part of James 1:27 in this connection, but the whole verse is relevant. In James 1:27, James writes, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep one-self unstained from the world."

This idea is behind the expression, "clean living." God calls his people to keep themselves pure and unstained. It means being very careful to avoid the pollution of sin. It means taking great care to avoid any taint of sin. Interestingly this, according to James, includes "visiting orphans and widows in their affliction." Purity includes compassion and caring for people in need. That means that selfishness and indifference to the suffering of others are defiling. They makes us unclean. James also mentions "keeping oneself unstained from the world." Paul conveys the same idea in a different way when he tells us in Romans 12:2 "Do not be conformed to this world..."

The imagery of keeping oneself unstained from the world in James - and Jesus commending people who have not soiled their garments - gives us a sense of how careful we are to be when it comes to being influenced by the world. The world is man in rebellion against God. The world is the godless culture in which we live. The world is the culture of individualism, living for money and things and the pleasures of this life, unrestrained sexuality, selfishness, hatred and violence.

We are called to keep any of this from staining our garments. We are called to keep far enough away from this way of living that none of the filth splatters on our clothes. Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:17 quotes from the OT saying, "Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing...." He continues in 2 Corinthians 7:1, "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God." All of this imagery suggests great care in resisting being influenced by the world.

Now again this does not mean that the few in Sardis who had not soiled their garments were without sin. The only person without sin is Jesus and every other person who is pleasing to God is pleasing to God by receiving Jesus' righteousness. These people whom Jesus says had not soiled their garments were sinners saved by grace. They were not perfect. But they were, by the power of the Spirit given to them by Jesus, living lives that Jesus described as not having soiled their garments. They were living holy lives. Not perfectly, but still their lives were noteworthy for their resistance to the allurements of the world. Jesus here - and the Bible in many other places - describes the lives of some people of God as righteous or holy or blameless. That never means perfect, but it does mean that such people by grace in Christ were living lives that were pleasing to God.

So there were these few people in the church in Sardis whom Jesus could say had not soiled their garments and that means that it is possible for us to live that way as well because we have received the same Holy Spirit as they had received. And it is amazing that Jesus calls them worthy. This does not mean that they were worthy in the sense of not needing to be saved by Christ, but it does mean that there is a kind of worthiness that is possible for those who have been saved by Christ. That is an awesome thing. Those who have not soiled their garments, which is possible through the power of the gospel, are considered by Jesus to be worthy. It is possible by grace to live in such a way as to be commended by Jesus. And what a powerful motivation that is to live in such a way as to keep our garments from being soiled!

In the rest of his message to the church in Sardis Jesus makes a number of promises to those who keep their garments from being soiled and who continue living like that to the end so that they are said to be those who conquer. First Jesus promises that they will walk with him in white and then he reiterates that promise in verse 5. "The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments."

We get a fuller picture of this in Revelation 7:9ff. I will read some of those verses. Verses 9-10, John is speaking and he says, "After this I looked, and behold a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" And verses 13-14, "Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?' I said to him, 'Sir you know.'" And he said to me, 'These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'"

That gives us a fuller picture of what Jesus means in our text when he says, “The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments.” The ones who conquer – which here refers to those who keep their garments from being soiled right to the end - will receive white robes. These are robes that have been made white in the blood of the Lamb. That is a reference to the righteousness of Christ. Those who keep their garments unsoiled are those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The holiness that they attained in this life is a real holiness, but it is not a perfect holiness. They still need the perfect righteousness that Jesus obtained for them by shedding his blood. Those who conquer will receive the white robes of the perfect righteousness of Christ.

And those who receive those white robes will stand before the throne and before the Lamb ... and they will be singing – ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

The point of the white robes is that those who conquer will be perfectly righteous before God. And they will sing of the salvation that God has accomplished through the Lamb.

This is held up for us as an encouragement to persevere in the struggle to live holy lives. It is a battle. We fight against our own sinful nature and the temptations of the world. Many of the church at Sardis had soiled their garments and were barely alive. This passage is a warning to them, but also call to repentance and holiness. There were examples of such holiness in their midst. And Jesus encourages them to repent and persist and to conquer with the promise that those who do will “clothed in white garments.”

Jesus makes two more promises to those who conquer. “I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.” There is a book in heaven called the book of life. Written in it are the names of the saved. Jesus’ words here seem to suggest that it is possible for a name to be blotted out of the book of life. We have to understand in the same way that we are to understand the warnings against falling away. On the one hand those who are truly saved can never fall away. On the other hand there are warnings against falling away. So here, those whose names are in the book of life can never be blotted out and yet here Jesus is saying that those who conquer – their names will never be blotted out of the book of life. From the point of view of election those who are saved can never fall away. From the point of view of our responsibility – we must conquer – we must persevere to the end or we will not be saved. Here Jesus is encouraging us to persevere to the end in the face of all the difficulties by promising that if we do persevere he will never blot our names out of the book of life.

And he will confess our names before his Father and before his angels. This is reference to what Jesus taught while he was on earth. One instance of this is found in Matthew 10:32-33, “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven.”

Whether it is in the context of severe persecution, or the kind of mockery that we may have to endure in our part of the world, Christians are required to acknowledge Christ before men. We are required to be witnesses to Jesus and to the kingdom of God and that requires that we acknowledge our relationship to Jesus before other people. So Jesus in our text includes this in what it means to conquer. One of the things that faithful believers can look forward to is having Jesus confess their name before the Father and the angels. Jesus will publicly acknowledge us to be one of his.

Once again there is a strong emphasis in this passage on the absolute necessity of living the kind of lives we are saved to live. This is a characteristic of the message of the book of Revelation. The good news of the forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake is there, but the great emphasis of this book is on the need to live the life we are saved to live – even if that would mean being killed because of our relationship to Jesus. There are very serious warnings.

And the promises for those who remain faithful all the way to death have to do with the blessings of salvation beyond this life. This is an important part of the message of Scripture. There is the amazing grace and love of God that is expressed in Jesus and the salvation that is in him. That salvation results in lives of serious sacrifice and service. And the warnings to those who fail to be serious about living for Jesus are very serious indeed. That seriousness is underscored by the closing words of each of Jesus' messages to the seven churches, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."