

# The Church at Sardis: The Fruitless Church

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] I'm going to read, to begin with here, verses 1-6, and that will encompass the next letter! that we're going to be considering. So Revelation chapter 3, verses 1-6.

! Here the angel of the church in Sardis write, here's the letter, these things says he who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars, I know your works, that you have a name, that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, 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. 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. 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. 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. All right, so there's the letter, the fourth letter to the fourth church here in the book of Revelation. The church is located in Asia Minor, and it's the church of Sardis, Sardis, and it is the fruitless church. There's a really good reason for that, and we'll get to that, the fruitless church. Now, in kind of thinking about this church and some of the things, really the initial things that Jesus says about this church, let me just kind of give a little illustration or something that could help us see even better the problem of this church. Astronomers tell them, you go out in the dark of the night, look up and see stars, and there's some that are brighter than others, and there's some that are called pole stars or polar stars, and astronomers say that a polar star, the light of a polar star, takes approximately 33 years to reach the earth. That's how long the light, if it were to just start being bright or giving out light, it would take 33 years to get here. Now, some stars are much further out, and they take much longer, but just to think about this in terms of some of the nearer stars, 33 years for that light to get here, and that's at 186,000 miles per second, give or take a few miles per second. Now, that's pretty fast, and yet it takes 33 years.

And so, that star could burn out, theoretically, and they say that some do. And so it could, you know, suddenly, for reasons we don't really know, plunge into darkness, suddenly become a dark star, and yet, from earth, it would still appear, just as bright as ever, for 33 years before it would begin to maybe flicker out and eventually go out, or change, kind of change colors, they change colors and then eventually go out. 33 years, that's kind of an amazing thing. So we can say this about a star like that, it could be a dead star right now. It could be a dead star shining, by all that we can see, shining solely by the light of a brilliant past. Now, think of it in those terms. A dead star shining by the brilliance, the light of a brilliant past, but the star's dead. It's dark. And you probably have heard these commercials on the radio about the International Star Registry. I'm not going to ask if anybody here has paid the money to have a star named after you, but you can do that. You can go online and have a star named after you, you know, if you want to, just pay the fee. Maybe after you, or maybe after your husband, or wife, or some other friend, or a dead loved one, or something. You just have it named after them.

Nobody's going to really know it unless they, you know, go to star registry. And I guess if you could locate the star. But anyway, you can do that if you want to. But that star could burn out and you wouldn't know it for decades or longer. It's just the nature of stars. Now, what does that have to do with the church at Sardis? Well, I think that's a good way, a fitting way to characterize what was happening, what had happened to this church at Sardis, and how Jesus characterizes this church in Sardis. And he says this, and it's a very frightening thing, appalling thing. He said, you have a name. A name that you're alive, vital. But what? You're dead. You have a name that you're alive, but you're dead. All right, so with that as an introduction, then, let's just see what Jesus says about this church. We'll divide this into three parts, and I'm not going to touch on everything in the letter. In

fact, I meant to, I just noticed something that I skipped over, and maybe I can get back with you about that next week. But anyway, now you're wondering what it is, but I'm not going to tell you. Just be distracting. But three things about this letter, about what Jesus says to the church, about the church, and the first thing is the word rebuke, obviously. All right, so Jesus' rebuke of this church, and it's very severe. The church at Sardis, obviously, from what is said in the letter, had, in a sense, built for themselves a good name. Now, you know, sometimes, you know, we might say a person has a name, and we don't mean a good name. You know, sometimes a person could build for himself or herself or a bad name, you know, something like that. But this, the idea here, in the context here, is that they had a good name, a good name. And that's what verse one tells us after we get past the introduction. He says, I know your works, that you have a name. You have a name, and the implication is a good name, a name that you're alive. You're not dead, you're alive. You have a name that you're a vital church, and yet you're dead. You're dead. All right, so the church at Sardis had built for themselves a good name, very clearly, from the letter. And we could say that they enjoyed a positive reputation. Not negative, but a very positive reputation. One that, no doubt, had spread far and wide, you know, among the Christian community at large, even beyond Sardis, maybe in the entire region, maybe all around Christendom, that Sardis was one of those churches that was just really alive and vital and all that. So they had a positive reputation. And unlike some of the previous letters that we've already looked at here in the book of Revelation, in these letters to the church of the Asia Minor, that there is nothing in the letters said about false doctrine. There's a big problem here, but it's not false doctrine. Nothing about Balaam. You know, we've already had Balaam mentioned in connection to one of the churches. Nothing about the Nicolaitans. Nothing there about them, whoever they were. Nothing about Jezebel in this church. And so, nothing about false doctrine. In fact, they were, from all outward signs, I think, a very progressive church. Now, we're kind of reading in to this a little bit, and reading between the lines, and maybe speculating, catching some of the,

[ 8 : 48 ] you know, the implications. I think it was a very progressive church. And we might even have this conjecture that very likely when visitors came to visit this church and worship with them, they probably left saying, man, what a dynamic, vital, exciting church. All right. We could even speculate that the church of Sardis was a growing church. Are there people joining this church?

I'm sure. The numbers were increasing. All right. Just kind of using our, maybe I'll come short of just saying sanctified imagination. We don't really know any of this. But Jesus is emphasizing this reputation, this name that they had. And it was very, very positive. I think they probably had a lot of programs and ministries and ministries and probably no shortage of finances and no shortage of, or lack of talent in the church.

All of that, you know, I'm kind of embellishing this because what I want us to do is begin to think about the fact that there are a lot of churches like Sardis in our day that have a great name. And they've got all, as you said, all the bells and whistles, very progressive, they're very, quote, dynamic and vibrant and exciting and all these things. But their goodness was outward appearance. An outward appearance of a past reality.

That's what we need to get about this church. If we were to characterize them in a sentence, their goodness was the outward appearance of a past reality because inwardly they were spiritually dead.

[ 10 : 42 ] And we don't have to speculate about that. That's exactly what Jesus said about them. They were dead. They have a good reputation, good name that you're alive, but you're really dead.

And so, we could say then, from what Jesus says here in verse 2, that the good works, quote, good works of the church were empty. Empty, fruitless. You could use that word if you wanted to.

He says in verse 2, be watchful and strengthen the things which remain that are ready to die. We'll get back to that phrase a little bit later. And this is what he says, I have not found your works perfect before God.

I have not found your works perfect before God. Now, what does he mean by that? And, you know, a little difficult maybe on the face of it in this translation.

Other versions use a little different wording. And so, really, we need to consider what the word perfect means. What does he mean by perfect? And I think the New American Standard probably has the word complete.

[ 11 : 48 ] Complete, I'm not sure about the ESV. What does this say? Complete as well. Well, the word for perfect is, the Greek word, is one of these very significant doctrinal words in the New

Testament.

It is the word plerao. Plerao. And that might not mean anything to you, but it means to fill to the full. Fill to the full. And so, really, it might be best translated fulfilled.

I have found that your works are not fulfilled. Not fulfilled. They're empty. And I say that this word plerao is significant because it is the same word that Paul uses in Ephesians 5.18, that famous passage.

Be filled with the Spirit. You know that verse of Scripture. Be filled with the Spirit. Or, we could say, just understanding the meaning, the bare meaning of the word plerao, to be so full, filled so full of the Holy Spirit that there's not room for you, self, flesh, or anything contrary to God.

And that's what we are constantly, day by day, called upon to move toward. To be, being, always being filled by the Holy Spirit.

[13:07] So full of the Holy Spirit of God that there's not room for anything else. Plerao is a very significant word. And so the idea in this letter is, Jesus is saying, I've not found your works fulfilled in the sight of the Lord.

Their works, then, we could characterize them this way. They were really nothing more than routine duties. Just routine. They kind of, I think, reduced all of, quote, Christian work, the work of the church, to duty.

Routine. And they were empty. And I, again, I think that could describe a lot of churches in our day. And to some degree or another, every church is guilty of empty works.

Some empty works. And reduce that down to individual believers who are involved in the church. It behooves an individual believer to examine himself, herself, in her work in the Lord.

It describes a lot of churches today. And even individual believers. And we need to examine ourselves. See if our works that we're so, kind of, quote, proud of, if they're not empty.

[14:22] Empty works. Just routine. Just duties. And, kind of like a modern art exhibit that I saw one time. And you've probably seen something like this. I never will forget this one.

It filled up, you know, kind of like half of that room. Half of this room. And really all it was, was, you know, a bunch of wheels and gears and cogs and chains and pulleys and, and I can't remember, all other kinds of things all put together and they were all moving.

You know, have you seen anything like that before? It just moves and twirls around and these, one gear fits into another gear and another gear and then a wheel and a chain and a cable and, and all these things and it's moving in perfect sync.

You know, it's kind of amazing. You just kind of sit back and look at that thing and say, well, this is really quite incredible. You know, everything moving in perfect sync and it's kind of mesmerizing to watch, you know, as that thing is just moving right before you and you wonder, how is this?

How did they come up with this? You know, figure this out and, and so everything's working in perfect sync but what does it do? Not a single thing except keep my attention.

[15:34] You know, I guess maybe there's some value in terms of a piece of art. That's what they call it. a piece of modern art. I guess it's successful on that level if nothing else.

But, but the illustration is, you know, you're doing all these things that are quite amazing and yet not accomplishing anything. And there are churches like that and the church of Sardis was like that and become like that.

And so, appearances can be deceiving to man but God knows the truth. God always knows the truth. And we can just be really proud of ourselves and our accomplishments and even be affirmed by nearly everyone around us and say, you know, you're just doing a great job.

I mean, you just really. And yet, it can still be empty for various reasons and God knows the truth of that. He knows the truth. That famous passage in 1 Samuel, you remember when, when they're looking for King David, who would soon be King David, but the Lord said to Samuel, do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature.

So, David's brothers were pigstrapping young men. You remember the story. And, you know, Samuel's going one by one. This is the one, right? No, no, no, this is the one. This is the one.

[17:00] And he says, don't look at the outward appearance, the height of the stature because I've refused him. Every one of those. For the Lord does not see as man sees. That's, that's the, the most profound statement in that verse.

The Lord does not see as man sees. He doesn't see the way we see. And, we can be so easily fooled. For man looks at the outward appearance. And I guess, it's fair enough to say that that's all

we can see.

You know, we can't see beyond that. But the Lord, of course, looks at the heart. So, God is not fooled even if everybody else is. Next, Jesus clarifies, I think, is clarifying the source of this death in the church.

The source of it. This death in the church. Verse 4, you have a few names even in Sardis. I like kind of the, kind of snide way this comes off, at least in the English.

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. Now, I say that what he's doing here, what this does is identify the source of the deadness in this church, but it does so by implication.

[18:24] The implication is that the church membership was full of, and here's a big quote, end quote, nominal Christians.

At least that's what some people want to call it. And I put it that way because that's, you know, maybe what some within the church, how they wanted to characterize others, the many others in the church, that they're just nominal Christians.

But, you know, really, there's no such thing as a nominal Christian. They would be best described as lost people, lost members of the church.

Is it possible to have unregenerate, lost, still in their sins, members of a Baptist church?

Is that possible? Absolutely. Not only possible, it's a reality. A sad reality. And so that's the idea, I think, behind, even, we go back, the main idea behind verse 1, it's that physically, they're physically alive but spiritually dead.

[19:39] Not saved people. And so they were attending the church, active, working, but many of them were lost, unregenerate.

And we get that by implication. He said, there are few names in Sardis, few of the members of the church, few of them, just few in the members of the church who have not defiled their garments.

They're not living in sin. They're not separated from God. They walk, and they walk in with me in white. So the implication is there were many, many others who were not saved.

And that was the problem here at the church. And the Bible frequently refers to this kind of person.

And I've given you several verses that say it very clearly or allude to it.

Matthew 8.22, Jesus said to a particular disciple, He said, follow me and let the dead bury their own dead. Who's He talking about when He says dead, the dead buried?

[20:40] Dead people, can they bury dead people? Well, spiritually dead people can. And so here's a disciple who's reluctant to go because he's got a dead father. He's got to bury you.

He said, let the dead bury their own dead. You follow me. But the implication is, of course, there are people who are walking alive around and they're dead, but they're really spiritually dead.

Matthew 15.8, this is even clearer. Jesus said of His own people, the Jews. These people draw near to Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from.

They're dead. They have a physical life, but no spiritual life. Ephesians 2.1, Paul said, and you He made alive who were dead in trespasses and sins.

Talk about unredeemed, unregenerate, unsaved, lost people, dead in trespasses, which we all were before.

[21:40] God, by His grace, saved us. 1 Timothy 5.6, Paul describing this immoral woman here, but she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives.

And this can be said of every unbeliever, dead while they live. Spiritually dead, even though physically alive.

2 Timothy 3.6, Paul describes some people as having a form of godliness, but denying its power, and from such people turn away. We're talking about lost, he's talking about lost people, he's not talking about saved people who are just kind of out of fellowship with God, or backslidden or something, they're absolutely denying the very sovereignty of God, and he says that they have a form of godliness.

This is the perfect description of the church of the Sargis, a form of godliness, they have a name, but they have denied his power, and from such people turn away.

And maybe the most troubling reference is, going back to Matthew again, Matthew 7.21, not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven, many will say to me in that day, at the end of the day, in the end times, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, cast out demons in your name, done many

wonders in your name, and we've done all these things, and then I will declare to them, never knew you, apart from me, you who practice law and so on.

[ 23 : 15 ] That means they never had any life. Not that they had it and lost it. They were doing things for the Lord because they were alive, and then somehow now they don't have it. He said, I never knew you.

Not that I knew you and because of what you did, I forgot you. But I never knew. You were never mine. You never had life. And there are many like that. The point being, many in the church.

And when a church is dominated, especially with its leadership, dominated by the unregenerate people, then that church becomes dead. And all their works are fruitless.

Alright, so Jesus' rebuke. This is Jesus' rebuke of the church at Sardis. They were in large part fake and false and therefore fruitless.

And Jesus knows the difference between outward appearance and inward reality. Second, Jesus' remedy for this church.

[ 24 : 15 ] His remedy. He says in verses 2 and 3, be watchful and strengthen the things which remain that are ready to die for I've not found your works perfect before God.

Remember therefore how you have received and heard hold fast and repent. Now, this is a word of remedy.

And it is partly, part of his comments pertain to a certain segment within the church as well as it being mixed with some general statements about the church.

But the remedy is directed toward a small remnant of true believers in the church. That were still in the church. True believers. Verse 2, again, these things which remain kind of a remnant that are ready to die.

that's an interesting kind of imagery of that's kind of interesting. Because apparently there was a small group in the church, we might say they were on life support.

[ 25 : 33 ] In a sense, life support, ready to die. They were ready to die. They were dying out. But they still remained. They were still in there. And just a small remnant, a few. And then Jesus is talking.

This is how we know that he's talking to a certain segment, a small segment within the church. He's talking to, we could say, the sleeping in the church. Those who are sleeping, not the dead.

Now, there's a large portion of the church. I'm thinking that it's some of the leadership of the church, real shakers and movers in the church.

They're dead because they're unsaved. But there is another group that are not dead, but they're sleeping. So, that's I think what is meant by be watchful.

Some versions have wake up. And that's the idea. Be watchful or wake up. So, wake up you sleepy heads. That's what he's saying to a certain group, a small group within the church.

[ 26 : 37 ] They're still remaining, but they're waning, having troubles. And so, he's not talking to the dead in the church, the unbelievers, because you can't awaken a dead person.

Alright, they're dead, you can't wake them up. But rather, this is a remnant of, I think, many of them struggling believers in the church, and the remedy is given to them.

And, you know, down through history, there has always been a remnant, hasn't there? A remnant of true believers. It's always been that way.

I've given you several verses there you can look at, and you can look at those on your own. But, you know, you go back and think about Noah, and think about Lot and his family, there's 7,000 still in Israel during Ahab and Jezebel's day, and so forth.

Alright, now, in the verses that I printed for you there, verses 3 and 4, 2 and 3, Jesus uses five imperatives in those verses, verses 2 and 3, to convey this remedy.

[ 27 : 54 ] Five imperatives. And again, remember, keep in mind, he's speaking to the living in the church. Some of them are struggling, maybe discouraged, some of them are still remaining strong, but it's a small remedy.

He's speaking to them, and he gives five imperatives. Now, giving these to the dead, they can't obey Christ. These are the living he's giving. So, there are five imperatives.

Can you pick them out? What's the first one? What's that? Be watchful. That's the first imperative.

Be watchful. And I've already said, and some versions bring this out, the literal idea is wake up.

Wake up. Alright, so that's the first step. He's got to say to this group within the church, we don't

know how small they were, possibly they didn't have a lot of influence in the church, in the direction

of the church, leadership of the church.

We don't have any idea, but there's a few in number. And the first thing they need to do is wake up. True believers in the church need to wake up. Wake up. That's the first imperative.

[ 29 : 06 ] Can't do anything until you open your eyes, realize the truth here, can't do anything about it until you wake up.

What's the second imperative? Strengthen. Strengthen the things which remain. And this, I guess we could say this is a word to the church within a church.

A lot of churches have a church within a church. There's the church in general, and a lot of it can be made up of false believers, but there's always the remnant, the real church within the church.

And so I think it's directed toward the mature believers. believers, they need to wake up and they have a responsibility to encourage and to teach and exhort and lead and even rebuke, if necessary, baby Christians within the body.

What's the third imperative? Remember. Remember what? Well, remember how or literally what? I'm not sure why the King James, I think both the King James and New King James have the word how.

[ 30 : 21 ] Remember how you have received and heard, but really the meaning of the word is what? Remember what you have received and heard, and what would that be, you think?

Well, for one thing, they had received the gospel, right? I mean, we could easily say that, clearly say that.

They're believers. They're saved. They've received the gospel. And it reminds us of 1 Corinthians 15.1 where Paul said, moreover, brethren, I declared to you the gospel which I preached to you, and the implication is they heard it, which also you did what?

You received. You received and in which you stand. So they had received the gospel, so they need to remember that. They have embraced the gospel.

gospel in the general sense, they had embraced God's word, God's holy word. They need to remember that.

[ 31 : 24 ] But, really, it's more than the gospel. Sound doctrine is important, isn't it? Absolutely. But sound doctrine alone, or if it's just alone, sound doctrine alone cannot reclaim or revitalize the church from spiritual death.

It can't. As good as sound doctrine is, and as important as it is, it by itself cannot revitalize a church. In fact, you can make a case that sound doctrine alone can sometimes contribute to deadness. the believers in that church, the true believers, that remnant, they had received something else more than just the gospel.

They had received the Holy Spirit. That is so important. They had received the Holy Spirit, as every true believer has.

Acts 2.38, remember when then Peter said to them, Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[ 32 : 44 ] Every born-again believer, the moment he believes, she believes. The moment you're saved, the Holy Spirit comes and indwells you. If you have not the Spirit, you don't have Christ.

You don't belong to Christ. So the Holy Spirit is vital, and I would even go so far as to say that second only to the gift of eternal life, I would certainly have to say that's number one.

Next to that, second to that, the greatest gift a Christian has ever received or will ever receive is the Spirit of God Himself dwelling, abiding in us.

He indwells us. He remakes us. He is the very presence of God in us, the Holy Spirit.

He fills us with love, joy, peace, and all the other fruits of the Spirit. He subdues, it's the Holy Spirit that subdues, restrains our wicked passions as believers.

[ 33 : 50 ] We don't do that ourselves. We don't discipline that in your life. I mean, there is spiritual discipline, don't misunderstand me, but being able to walk straight and right and morally and to press down the evil passions, the cravings of the flesh, that's not a fleshly exercise.

That's not something we can just discipline. we're absolutely dependent upon the Holy Spirit. And He transforms our character, that's what He's doing all throughout our journey of faith.

He changes us into the very image of Christ and on and on we could go. And today there's no earthly temple, no temple made with hands.

God dwells in our hearts, in the hearts of His people. He dwells in His dwelling places with His people. Alright, so this then we could say is an urgent plea for God's people to be filled with the

Holy Spirit.

Remember to say this is what you need to do. Wake up and you need to remember what you've received.

[ 35 : 13 ] Certainly the Word of God, you've got the truth, you've received that and that's a great wonderful gift, but you've received the very presence of God, the very person of God in your heart and in your life.

And by the way, it's not kind of like pushing a button in your life and pop, you've got the filling of the Holy Spirit. There's not some special formula to go through or learn how to speak in tongues or something like that.

That's not it. The filling or fullness of the Spirit is something we maintain daily. When Paul said in Ephesians 5.18, that famous passage quoted a moment ago, be filled with the Spirit, he was saying literally, go on being filled.

Go on being filled. Be in a state of being filled. So this is an everyday affair. Every day we renew our repentance.

Every day we renew our obedience and our allegiance. And every day we renew our reliance and submission not just once a day but throughout the day. And then in that process we receive his filling.

[ 36 : 28 ] His filling. Really, the idea is he receives more of us. We've got all of him that you can get.

But he doesn't have all of us. And so this is the be being filled. Alright, what's the fourth imperative? Hold fast. Probably some of you would have wanted to say quit.

Hold fast. And I go back to 1 Corinthians 15.1 again because the latter part of that verse, Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand.

This is the idea to hold fast. This is progressive, isn't it? Very progressive thing in these imperatives. You're going to hold fast and the final imperative is repent.

Repent. turn lock, stock, and barrel over to the Lord. So, Jesus' rebuke, His remedy, I'm about done.

[ 37 : 33 ] I'm going to go ahead and finish it. If you walk out on me, then just be on your conscience. Finally, Jesus' reward for this church, His reward.

And I say for this church, it's really for the true church here. Verses 4-6, you have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments.

There are few of you still have it. And they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy. 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.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the church. There's a lot to say here, but let me just quickly point out a few things. Many in the church in Sardis had soiled their garments with the dirt of sin.

A few had resisted. They remained faithful. And their reward would be to wear white.

[ 38 : 45 ] white. Using a metaphor. And white in the Bible often symbolized purity. Purity.

I could point out a few even in Revelation. There's the white stone. We looked at that last week, week before, whenever it was. Revelation 2.17. And remember, he harkened back to that.

It's a symbol of pure guidance, the pure guidance of Christ. Christ. So, white symbolizes purity. A white cloud, Revelation 14.14.14.

And it comes on a white cloud. And it symbolizes the pure, absolutely pure kingship of Christ. And then you have the great white throne.

In Revelation 20.11. Which represents the pure judgment of Christ. So, white is symbolic of purity. Jesus said that the ones clothed in white are worthy.

[ 39 : 50 ] Worthy. Not their own worthiness. I mean, something that they found within themselves. But, of course, the worthiness granted them through Christ.

Because of Christ and through Christ. It is His worthiness given to us, granted to us. And Jesus said that the worthy ones will have their names recorded in the Lamb's Book of Life.

And I like this. Let me read it again. I will not blot out His name out of the Book of Life, but I will confess His name before my Father and before the angels.

I mean, that's something. In the end, the books will be opened. The Bible says. Books. Now, the dead will be judged by what is written in the book.

And everyone whose name is not found written in the Lamb's Book of Life will be thrown into the lake of fire. That's what the Bible says. Jesus said to His own disciples, remember, in Luke 10 and verse 20, rejoice because your names are written in heaven.

[ 41 : 03 ] That's the Lamb's Book of Life. So, He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.