

**To the messenger of the church in Sardis write: The one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars says this: I know your works. You have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up, and strengthen what is left, which is about to die, for I have found that your works are not complete in the sight of my God. 3 Therefore remember what you received and heard. Hold on to it and repent! If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come upon you. 4 Yet you have a few names in Sardis, people who have not defiled their clothes. They will walk with me in white clothing, for they are worthy. 5 The one who is victorious in this way will be clothed in white clothing. I certainly will not erase his name from the Book of Life, and I will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. 6 Whoever has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**

Sardis was one of seven churches in Asia Minor that is addressed in the book of Revelation. Jesus is pictured as the great and mighty God who easily walks among the seven churches which are pictured as blazing lampstands. Some were burning brightly while others were flickering out. Sardis looked like a vibrant and active church. They were full of activity and doing all sorts of things. But when Jesus looked at this church from above, He saw a dead and dying church. Why was she dying? She became so enamored with herself and what she was doing that she forgot who she was and what got her there in the first place. This teaches us that looks can be deceiving, and so can success. So let's look at this letter to Sardis and take a good look at ourselves here at Trinity, asking the question -

### What Kind of A Church Are We?

#### I. Are we overly active?

Activity is good. God wants us to be active. He equates laziness with wickedness. But it also needs to be controlled. Think of the super hyper child in fifth grade that gets on the basketball court for the first time and is running and dribbling all over the place. The coach loves his energy, but he needs to harness it so that the child can actually cooperate with other teammates and win the game. So also Sardis was a church that was dying out not because of inactivity but BECAUSE of her activity. She was all about the activity but she lost sight of why she was doing what she was doing. You might otherwise compare it to a good athlete who is all about the statistics but forgets about the team.

Like I said, activity is good. Let's not forget that. We want to be known and seen for what we do in our society and how we care for people. We are active with our bookstore and school. Yet it would be nice if we at Trinity found more projects in our community so that our community would know that we are here to help. If any of you want to help with that, we could really use some direction. It was great when we got together a group of people to help Laura move. We should do more of that. If we aren't doing anything we easily become stagnant.

But the temptation can be that motivations can get fuzzy. Maybe some pride enters in too. "We aren't lazy, like those other churches. We aren't judgmental like they are. We aren't liberal like them. We make a difference in our community. You can see the Spirit doing great things here!" What ends up happening?

Without even realizing it the goal is to attract Christians to their church instead of simply wanting people to be brought to faith and stay in the faith of Christ. Instead of preaching Law and Gospel, repentance and faith, the message becomes do this and do that, be here and be there, this is how you succeed in life. We have to ask ourselves, who do we want people to be attracted to? The church or the Christ of the church?

Here's another illustration - take for instance the busy man. He is always doing things with the children and driving them back and forth from school and activities. He's friendly to the other parents. He gets his wife whatever she wants at home. On the outside he is a picture of what a husband and father should be. He's always doing something! Most wives might think to themselves, "I wish my husband did half as much as he did." But his wife doesn't like how busy he always is. He doesn't engage with her. He doesn't slow down and spend time with her. He never compliments her. He talks about how much he loves her, but he never shows her. He wants to be SEEN as a good husband, but he doesn't want to actually BE one. Nobody on the outside knows this, because he puts on such a great persona. But his children and wife know the real man. He doesn't really have love on the inside. Perhaps that was the problem at Sardis. They wanted everyone to see how active they were, but with all of their activity they lost sight of who they really were.

It seems that we have a similar problem with Christians yet today. Everyone is so busy doing stuff and posting it on the Internet. They want everyone to see how active and happy they are: how much they are doing for and with one another. They go to all of the sporting events. They talk about how much they are praying for other people. They are very supportive of others as they comment on post after post after post. They are maybe even the first to come and help when someone needs something done. There's nothing wrong with that in and of itself. We need active people that are willing to help and pray. But then when it comes to going to church, you barely ever see them take the time to sit and listen to a sermon or receive the sacrament. They just won't take the time to sit and listen. It doesn't seem "practical" enough to sit around for a Sunday morning and listen to talk about sin or grace or heaven or hell, the Trinity, sanctification or justification. Something is wrong there.

II. Are we remembering to hold on to what we have?

What is the remedy? John writes for the church in Sardis to do four things. **Wake up! Remember. Hold. Repent.** It's ironic that John calls on them to wake up by slowing down and taking the time to REMEMBER. But that's exactly what they were supposed to do. What were they to remember? They were still sinners who still needed a Savior, even with all of their works. This would be in keeping with his other command to REPENT. This was the very first thing that Luther mentioned in his 95 Theses at the start of the Reformation. He wrote, "*When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent', he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*"

Remember to repent! Repentance is never supposed to end. That's why we try to keep it before your eyes at the beginning of every service when we start with a confession of sins and an absolution. "Here is where I have failed, God. This is what I deserve." Even though I may be busy praying for people and serving those that God has placed before me, and even if I have let my light shine to the world, I still deserve nothing from my works. We go back to square one. I'm a sinner. I deserve your wrath. This is easy to FORGET when we live in a society that hates the whole concept of SIN or GUILT or SHAME. It's easy to forget who God really is as revealed in the Bible and to reimagine God to be the way WE want Him to be, as a big lovable fur ball instead of a holy and righteous God who demanded and RECEIVED a payment for our sins in Jesus.

We can't forget about that HOLD ON command either. What are we holding on to? What you have RECEIVED and HEARD. What did you hear? **From infancy you have heard the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.** You have heard about the God who took on flesh and became your sin. You heard about God's Son who was punished and damned on the cross in place of the world. You heard about how He rose from the grave victorious. You have heard about how you were baptized and your sins were washed away - how you received a white robe of righteousness in Christ so that you look holy in God's sight through faith alone. Hold onto His Word that says to you, **"Take and eat, this is my body, which is given FOR YOU."** Hold onto the Word by continuing to listen to it and receive what the Holy Spirit gives you through the Lord's Supper. This is what you need to keep HOLDING on to.

Nobody makes their confirmation vows trying to let go of their faith. But it's like walking into a grocery store without a cart or with just a little basket. "I only need a few items." Then you start seeing other things you need, and before you know it you're trying to juggle five other things. By the time you get to the car you realize that you left without the one thing you came for! Jesus warns us not to do that! It's good to keep on reviewing your Bible, remembering what you learned. (By the way, in keeping with this I want to do more confessing of faith from the catechism, to bring to mind the things you memorized when you were young.) We need to remember what we have. If we forget it, we won't be ready when He comes, and He'll come like a THIEF in the night!

III. Are we ready for Jesus to come any time?

Isn't it strange that Jesus puts Himself in the shoes of a thief? You think of what a thief comes to do. He comes to steal what is in your house while you aren't watching. How could Jesus steal anything from us, when He already owns it all? But maybe that's the whole point. When you get so busy and focused on your house projects and your promotions and your life, you start to look at Jesus as a thief. You don't want Him in your house. You don't want to give Him your time or your firstfruits. You want to keep everything for YOURSELF. You want to set your own agenda and do your own thing at your own time. Instead of singing, "Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to thee," you lock the door to Him and try to keep Him from looking in at what you really have.

So yes, when He does come to intrude on your life by talking to you about priorities or by taking your health or finally ending this world, you do all you can to bolt the door to Him. But sooner or later - if you want to live that way - He will break it down. Everything you worked for and concentrated on will be taken from you specifically because of your greed and your desire to keep Jesus out: your job, your reputation, your health, your family: all because you wanted it all. What is all the more sad is that Jesus gives us so much for our pleasure to use, but He just doesn't want us to let go of HIM through the process! He wants to be here with us so that we see Him through our gifts. He doesn't want to be a thief. He wants to be a welcome and generous guest, a part of the family, the head of the household!

I'm sure Sardis had good intentions. Unfortunately, they got so busy DOING things to build up their status that they forgot the most important status of all - which wasn't based on what THEY did but on what JESUS already did for them. Can you see how this could happen to you too? The more gifts that you have, the more time that

you have, the more freedoms that you enjoy, do you lose Jesus through the process? Have you taken the warning? What kind of a Christian are you? Remember! Hold on! Repent!

There once was a young boy who went out for a football team. He got a brand new white jersey and pants. His helmet was nice and shiny. His parents took his picture in his new uniform, and he was so excited about being on the team. But the day of the game it rained out. The field was all muddy. He didn't want to get his jersey dirty. So he told the coach, "I can't play. I don't want to get my jersey dirty." The little boy lost sight of the game. He was supposed to get dirty. He could wash his jersey afterwards.

Ironically, there was another boy got in the game and he didn't mind getting his jersey dirty at all. As a matter of fact, he loved it! He loved it so much that he couldn't help but play around in the mud. But instead of paying attention to the ball or helping the team, all he did was look at how dirty his jersey was.

What kind of a church are we? Are we obsessed with how we look? Churches and Christians can fall into the two extremes. We can think that since we're sinners we can't do anything right - that since we have been rescued from this world we shouldn't get into it at all. So we sit on the sideline and don't do anything. Jesus puts us in the game of life in hopes that we aren't afraid to get dirty as we fight against the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh. It's got to be a battle. We need to engage with the world. As we fail, we rely on Jesus' forgiveness and His grace as our robe of righteousness no matter how many sinful failures we have. We repent and believe!

The other extreme is that we get so active in using the stuff that we've been given that we forget to talk to the coach or listen to Him. We refuse to go the sidelines during time outs and get some water. The church at Sardis was active, but they thought that's all church was about - making a name for themselves, instead of remembering who they were there and why they were there in the first place, to hear about Jesus and receive His washing and forgiveness. Coming to church is essential for a church and her members to grow and hold onto Jesus.

Remember who you are - a baptized and forgiven child of God. Don't stop holding on to His Word and receiving His sacrament. And continue to repent, taking a good look at your sins and failures and continuing to ask God for mercy in Christ. Then the Holy Spirit will keep burning in you to strengthen your faith, and make you active in your faith, so that we will be a strong church, burning bright to the glory of God. Amen.