

## Counterfeit: The Church at Sardis

### Revelation 3:1-6

**MPS** Jesus is the Sovereign King who calls Christians out of spiritual slumber to walk in His righteousness before the world.

**OBJ** Every person should stop living in a counterfeit reality of nominal Christianity because of Three Words from King Jesus.

#### READ Revelation 3:1-6

*“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.*

*“I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. 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. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. <sup>6</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’ **Revelation 3:1-6***

**Sardis was a city of prominence from a bygone era.** Set on a mountain overlooking the plain of Hermus, about 50 East of Ephesus, the city was surrounded on three sides by towering rock walls that descended 1,500 feet to the valley below. The city seemed virtually inaccessible on all but one side, providing a natural protection against enemy attack.<sup>1,2</sup> Sardis was another town known for its trades and crafts. “It was at Sardis that gold and silver coins were first struck. It claimed to be the first to discover the art of dyeing wool.”<sup>3</sup> Prosperity was plentiful in Sardis, even though it may not have occupied the spotlight as other cities.<sup>4</sup> Pagan worship also may not have been as prominent as other cities, but was still plentiful. One commentator describes Sardis’ religious life this way. “The chief cult in Sardis was that of Cybele, the goddess of one of Asia’s most famous mystery religions. Sardis was also zealous in promoting emperor worship. The people of the city were widely known for their luxurious, loose way of life.”<sup>5</sup> This is enough to provide an accurate picture of Sardis. [While the glory days of Sardis were centuries past from the time of John’s writing in Revelation, there remained plenty of affluence and luxury, prominence, and pagan worship to entertain people and entangle Christians.](#)

**Jesus addresses the problem with the Sardis Christians;** *“I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”* These are both hard and shocking words. The Christians at Sardis were known, but not for who they truly were. People thought that they were alive. And evidently, so did the Christians themselves. [Jesus said they had built a reputation, but what was said and known about them, and even what they had come to think of themselves, was not true.](#)

**Reputation is a representation of, but not the reality of, life.** Because the benefits can be so good, and building it so easy, the temptation to not only build a reputation, but live to sustain or manage it can come to dominate a person’s life. The more the reputation produces good, the stronger the temptation becomes to maintain it, until a façade is created. The Sardis Christians built a reputation of being alive. Because of their reputation, people spoke highly of them. Because of their reputation, they managed carefully what others were told about or saw them do. And finally, because of their reputation, what they began to think of themselves was formed by the reputation than reality. But Jesus said reality was that they were

<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris, [Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 78. Morris writes, “The city was built on a hill so steep that its defences seemed impregnable.”

<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 91–92. Mounce states, “The acropolis, with its nearly perpendicular rock walls rising 1,500 feet above the lower valley (on all but the south side), was essentially inaccessible and provided a natural citadel.”

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 92.

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 92. “Mounce records, “Jewelry found in the local cemeteries indicates great prosperity.”

<sup>5</sup> George Eldon Ladd, [A Commentary on the Revelation of John](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 55.



dead. What makes this so hard and shocking is that it is completely opposite of what they, and everyone else, believed about them. But it is true because Jesus said it. [Reputation makes it easy to construct a counterfeit identity where people hide their true self, and this is most easily done in relationship with God.](#)

[Jesus is the Sovereign King who calls Christians out of spiritual slumber to walk in His true righteousness before the world.](#)

**What was unique about the Church at Sardis seems to be the very thing that produced a bad quality in them.** “The church was not troubled by persecution; it was not disturbed by heresy; it was not distressed by Jewish opposition; it was well known as an active, vigorous Christian congregation, characterized by good works and charitable activities. But in the sight of God, all of these religious activities were a failure because they were only formal and external, and not infused with the life-giving Holy Spirit. Here is a perfect example of purely nominal Christianity which in all outward and formal aspects is outstanding but which in the sight of God is a complete failure.”<sup>6</sup> The affluence and luxury that characterized the culture of Sardis produced a deep, spiritual apathy among the Christians.<sup>7</sup> “They lacked the appropriate motivation and spiritual orientation, without which all external activity is morally impotent. The believers at Sardis had established a name for themselves in the eyes of the community, but in God’s sight their works had not measured up.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus taught, “*Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.*” (Matthew 6:1) “Here is a picture of nominal Christianity, outwardly prosperous, busy with the externals of religious activity, but devoid of spiritual life and power.”<sup>9</sup> They had an appearance of godliness, but no power in it. (2 Timothy 3:5) [The church at Sardis lived for the applause from the city by nominal Christianity, which caused them to fall short of receiving applause from God.](#)

**The real danger of reputation is in its potency to deceive the one it repute.** What others say about you is not (inherently) true of you. What you tell others about you, is not (inherently) the real you. There are parts, likely, that are true, for all lies have a kernel of truth. But the whole picture is not necessarily true. And, what you think about when you think about you, is not (inherently) the real you. The biggest problem with reputation is that it deceives you to live in and maintain a counterfeit reality. And this is as true for a church as it is for any individual Christian. [Christian / Church, you are not defined by any of what is said nor thought of you, but Christians look to the truth of God’s Word to define reality, even about you!](#)

**TRANS** The church at Sardis had succumbed to the spiritual death of nominal Christianity, that what they were known for was not true of how they really lived. “Too often, when we encounter no spiritual adversaries, it is because we are the enemy.”<sup>10</sup> They were spiritually dead because they lived by reputation above righteousness, they depended on “the shadow of what they were known for” instead of walking in the light of King Jesus and what He had saved them for. And while there was still time to do something about it, they didn’t have much time, and didn’t know how much time, but the time to act was now.

**OBJ** [King Jesus gives three Words to stop living in a counterfeit reality of nominal Christianity.](#)

## 1. Wake Up!

**Jesus calls the church out of spiritual slumber.** The good news here is that their death is not yet ultimate, but His first word brings hope. Jesus says, “*Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.*” [Wake up is about living as you have been made alive in Jesus.](#)

<sup>6</sup> George Eldon Ladd, [A Commentary on the Revelation of John](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 56.

<sup>7</sup> George Eldon Ladd, [A Commentary on the Revelation of John](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 55. Ladd states, “The main problem is that of a deep spiritual apathy, which may have resulted from the softness and love of luxury which characterized the secular society.”

<sup>8</sup> Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 94.

<sup>9</sup> George Eldon Ladd, [A Commentary on the Revelation of John](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 56.

<sup>10</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, [Revelation](#), vol. 20, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), Re 3:1–6.



Remember, you became a Christian, the church, because you heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, responded in faith to obey, and repented of your sin. He forgave and cleansed you of your sin, set His righteousness on you, filled you with His Holy Spirit, and empowers you to walk in the light of the truth by His command. "Wake up" means a Christian's whole life is defined by the reality of the gospel; I was made by God for God, He loves me and died to save me, and He has redeemed me to live as a faithful witness for Him to make disciples of all nations. [This Christian confession defines all reality by God's truth that produces good works to minister and serve the mission of King Jesus.](#)

People come to live under the shadow of a reputation because they stop confessing the truth of God's Word about their lives, though they still go through the motions. **SONG** The song, "New Name Written Down in Glory" (Charity Gayle) declares, "I am who I am because the I Am tells me who I am." The Christian confession is the confession of the I Am's declaration. Confession confronts reputation with God's truth, that I am a sinner but by God's grace He has forgiven and cleansed me to walk in the light of His righteousness. By faith through repentance, I reject the temptation of reputation, whether by pressure from outside to maintain and manage it, or by spiritual lethargy to let it define reality. Rather, I wake up each day to the confession of the Lord Jesus that defines my life, that I am His and He is mine, and this life I live is by faith in obedience to His Word, and for His glory. [Christian, the instant you stop confessing you enter the shadow of deception by allowing reputation to define you above remembering what Jesus has done for you.](#)

[Christian, you don't need a reputation, you have a confession.](#) Wherever you sense slumber or sleep, apathy or laziness, indifference toward Jesus today, He calls each person to wake up! [Are you living in the dead shadow of reputation, or is your life defined by your confession that Jesus is King?](#)

## [2. A Warning for any who will not wake up, or who wait.](#)

Sardis is an interesting study. "Sardis's acropolis had never been taken by battle, but twice in its history invaders had captured it by stealth unexpectedly in the night."<sup>11</sup> They thought they were safe because of what they could see. It was the unimaginable feat during their sleep that caught them unaware to overthrow them. [Reputation creates a false sense of security that puts one to sleep, to lower their guard.](#)

Jesus warns to stop believing reputation and live in light of what is really true of us, because what we don't know is the very thing that will overthrow us. He will come in judgment, and at a time we do not know, and cannot know. Peter and Paul teach this same thing (2 Peter 3:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:2), that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night! You can manage a reputation for a long time. But you can never know when the time runs out to live under the shadow of that reputation to be confronted with the truth. What you can know is that Jesus will come, and you will be asleep to be conquered. [Jesus warns the sleeping, nominal Christian living a counterfeit reality to wake up, or He will visit at a time when you are unaware!](#)

## [3. A Reward of walking with Jesus](#)

**Praise God, with Jesus our hope is always bigger than our threat!** Jesus knows there are some who have not "soiled their garments". Soiled garments were not allowed in pagan temples of the First Century. You had to clean yourself up if you wanted to worship a false idol. The irony is that before God, no matter how clean your clothes, you worship false idols because your soul is stained. But worshiping Jesus is the complete opposite. He invites us to come to Him wearing our filthy rags of sin. He washes us clean by His blood, and gives us His white robe of righteousness. Those who conquer are clothed in the white garment of His righteousness, that He puts on us, and our name is recorded on His roster! With Jesus, white uniforms are the color of the winning team that He invites you to come home to! [Jesus forms your confession that defines and adorns your whole life with His reward, when you believe in Him and repent, to become a Christian.](#)

Friend, Jesus invites you to trust in Him to do for you what you cannot do for yourself, and receive the life of righteousness, peace, love, and joy that only He gives. You don't have to live in the shadow any longer. Jesus waits to give you a confession of eternal life!

<sup>11</sup> Craig S. Keener, [The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Re 3:3.



Jesus is the Sovereign King who calls Christians out of spiritual slumber to walk in His true righteousness before the world.

**CLOSE** You can build a reputation quickly, more easily, and more conveniently, but you will likely forsake true character, the heart on which God looks. But if you focus on becoming the person God has created and redeemed you to be, your reputation will be taken care of by Jesus Himself. Stop worrying about your reputation and live for a faithful witness to Jesus Christ; NOT what other think of you, but what and how others think of God because of your life. This is what Jesus calls His church to wake up to.

**Invite** Believer's Baptism Next week

