

GOOD WORKS

Revelation 3:1-6 To the Church in Sardis

3 “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.

² 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. ³ 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.

⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

MESSAGE:

In some ways, the church at Sardis is the most interesting of the seven churches Jesus addresses in His letters. He says that it has a reputation for being alive but is spiritually dead and that the works of its members are “incomplete.” In other words, the Holy Spirit was not active among the members of the church and their works were not good works in God’s eyes. But why was the Holy Spirit inactive at Sardis and what was wrong with the works of its members?

God says that our works or actions are an outward indication of what lies within us. If our motives are good our actions will be good; if our motives are selfish our actions or works will be incomplete. In Jesus’ words, “...*from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean.*” (Mark 7:20-23) In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.*” (Jer. 17:9)

Jesus expounds upon this in His *Sermon on the Mount* when He equates anger with murder and lust with adultery. Anger and lust are inward sins; murder and adultery are their outward symptoms. God searches the heart and bases His judgment of the deed on what He finds there. If the motives of the heart are impure,

the deeds that flow out of them will be impure. A good work cannot come from a corrupt motive—no matter how good it may seem in the eyes of other people.

Luther put it this way: “...*God judges according to your inmost convictions; His law must be fulfilled in your very heart, and cannot be obeyed if you merely perform certain acts—no one keeps the law by works.... Therefore familiarize yourself with the fact that it is one thing to do what the law commands, and another thing to fulfill the law.*” (Martin Luther: *Selections from his Writings*, New York, 1962, pp. 20-21) In other words, one can outwardly comply with the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” by doing a good deed for your neighbor, yet the deed will be incomplete if it is tainted with the desire to seem generous in your neighbor’s eyes or to hope for a reward. If that is the case then what you did was not a good work—or at least not a good or complete work—just a matter of legal compliance. You might as well say that paying your taxes is a good work. We do such things either out of fear of punishment or hope for reward—which is to say that we do them for selfish reasons.

In the language of St. Paul, only the new man—the redeemed man—who has a heart which has been changed from stone to flesh—can do deeds which God considers good or complete. Only the new man fulfills the law in his heart as well as in his deeds. This the kind of heart David prayed for when he said, “*Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*” (Ps. 51:4)

Well and good. But where do we find this new heart in ourselves? We don’t necessarily find it in our feelings or emotions. Emotions are unreliable guides: they are hard to control and they can easily mislead us. There’s a country western song that asks the question: “*How can it be wrong when it feels so right?*” To which the answer is: easily! Emotions have a place in our lives but they have nothing to do with spiritual truth.

If not in our emotions, then, where **do** we find this new heart? Well, the first place we look for it is the same place we look for all good things—in the word of God. God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah: “*I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.*” (Jeremiah 24:7) And through Ezekiel: “*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.*” (Ezekiel 36:26) The first place we go to find a new heart is in God’s promise, not emotional introspection.

Now we have to be very careful about how we understand the word, “love” in the command to “*love your neighbor as yourself.*” (Matthew 22:39) It doesn’t refer to a feeling of affection. If love referred simply to affection, our neighbor would be

no better off by our having loved him than he was before we did so. If “*God so loved the world...*” meant only that God had affection for us, we’d still be in a pickle. It’s because “*He gave His only begotten Son to die for us*” that we are saved. We don’t have to wait to be motivated by feelings of affection for God in order to do His bidding: a “new heart” doesn’t involve a transformation of our emotions, ***it involves a transformation of our will.*** If emotions like joy or gratitude accompany this transformation of our will, all the better. But our will should never be a slave to our emotions.

One thing that confuses the issue for us is that in our day and age we use the word “heart” to refer to the seat of the emotions, whereas in Jesus’ day it was used to refer to what we now call “the mind.” People thought with their heart, they felt with their gut. So when Jesus summarizes the Commandments by saying, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength” and “Love your neighbor as yourself,” He is talking about an inclination of the will, not of the emotions. When the Lord gives us a new heart, he is giving us a new will, a will which approves of what He is doing in our lives as well as in the lives of others. A will which motivates us to act in accordance with His purposes. We WANT to love God above all other things; we WANT to love our neighbor as ourselves. And in wanting to do these things lies the fulfilling of the Law; the wanting is what makes the work a good or complete work.

So what was incomplete about the works of the church at Sardis? Whatever they were, however good they may have seemed to those who did them and to others who saw them, they must have proceeded from unchanged hearts and in God’s eyes were selfish. In the same way, although the members of the church *appeared* to be spiritually alive, they were spiritually dead. And spiritual death comes about when a congregation no longer considers their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, to be their first love. Jesus is the light and of the church and when His light dims, the congregation starts to die. And a vital relationship with Jesus Christ comes only from the faithful preaching and teaching and hearing and trusting in God’s word. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to the Father for His disciples, saying, “*Sanctify them by the truth: Thy word is truth.*” And to the Jews who believed in Him he said: “*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.*” (John 8:32)

Trust in God’s word is the hallmark of churches in America that are healthy and growing. Conversely, churches—and denominations—which no longer do so have declined in membership and continue to do so. As the author of Hebrews wrote, “*The word of God is living and active...*” (Hebrews 4:12) In Paul’s words to Timothy, “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and*

training in righteousness...” (2 Tim. 3:16) Or in the words of Jesus: “...*the Scripture cannot be broken.*” (John 10:35)

The church at Sardis was dying. Therefore Jesus writes to them—and to all churches like them: “*Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die...*” (Rev. 3:2) God never abandons His church; it is His church that abandons Him and they do so by distorting or abandoning His word. When a church rejects God’s word as its guiding light, it opens its doors to human wisdom and begins to lose sight of the Kingdom of God. When its pastors begin to preach what its members want to hear rather than what they need to hear, they begin to lose sight of the Kingdom of God. When politics are preached from the pulpit rather than the Word of God, its members begin to lose sight of the Kingdom of God. The church becomes just another friendly neighborhood organization where people come to socialize rather than to repent of their sins and receive forgiveness from Christ. Their only hope is to be re-baptized in word and Spirit so that they can come to life again. So Jesus writes to the church at Sardis: “*Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent!*” (Rev. 3:3) Harken to the word you have received and heard and your pulse will quicken with new life!

The promise however is attended by a warning: “*But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief and you will not know at what time I will come to you.*” (Rev. 3:3) God did not intend His church to be merely a social organization: He intended it to be a conquering army, a force of nature which the gates of hell could not withstand—a kingdom of priests and a light to the nations. The church at Sardis—like many contemporary churches in America—no longer fit that definition. It’s time for a wake-up call!

It all starts with the loss of first love. When the first love of a church is Jesus Christ and the truth of His word its members grow in faith and help light up the world with their good deeds. When Jesus ceases to be its first love it opens its doors to one form of idolatry or another, and human wisdom takes over. Its works become corrupt and it begins to die spiritually.

Next week we will look at a church which has come very close to that end.