



Text: Revelations 3:1-6

Theme: Reputation versus Reality

Intro: A number of years ago my step-father drove semi-trailer units for Caron Transport based out of Edmonton. I remember him telling me of the time when he was driving on a long journey between Edmonton and Manning, a familiar stretch of road that he knew like the back of his hand. He had gone through one of the many familiar towns along that route, as he had done dozens of times before, but this time it was different. Though he had navigated his way through the town successfully, with his eyes wide-open, he was actually asleep at the wheel, and only realized it after he had come out the other side of the town. Needless to say that experience left an indelible imprint on him.

-As strange as that may sound to you and I, “road sleep”, a phenomenon common to many long-haul truckers, happens more frequently than we realize.

-It's a condition that nuzzles its way in, so much so that even though the driver's eyes are wide-open, his mind is almost literally asleep...almost like being in a trance or stupor.

-It's dangerous for the driver to be in such a condition, but it's also equally dangerous for other drivers on the road when he is in that sleepy state of mind.

-The church at Sardis, on the long journey between paradise lost and paradise renewed, succumbed to spiritual “road sleep” along the way.

-Though she had her physical eyes wide open and had all the hallmark signs of attentiveness, in reality, she was wide awake but dead asleep at the wheel of existence.

-As you have been making your way through this sermon series entitled, You've Got Mail, you know by now that the previous four churches were all commended for something (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira).

-As we come to the letter to the church in Sardis, we must take note that it lacks any mention of commendation by Christ, and it shares this dubious honor with the church at Laodicea.

-The ironic thing about this is that Jesus said the church at Sardis “had a reputation of being alive” but Jesus said that they were “dead.”

-We might well ask who was perpetuating the myth of its spiritual vitality when it virtually had none and who was being convinced of its presence when it was absent, but one thing we can know for certain is that our Lord Jesus Christ who is the life of the church was not convinced.

-He sees beyond the superficial, surface-oriented stuff of life to the soul and spirit of the church, out of which true life flows.

-He knows the real condition of the church deep below the surface, down where the spirit of the church resides as opposed to what lies above the surface that the human eye can see.

I. The City of Sardis Through the Tunnel of History

1.1. Geography of Sardis: The city has two parts: an upper (original part) and a lower, built later. The upper part was situated on Mt. Tmolus which rose 1500' above the Hermes valley below. There was only one “road” that led to the upper part/acropolis at

the top and it was heavily guarded by the soldiers of Sardis (Picture). An attacking army trying to gain entrance to the city through this road would be frustrated in its attempts since it could so easily be defended. However, there was another way into the city that the Sardians left unprotected and it cost them dearly on two separate occasions.

1.2. Greatness of Sardis: Capital of Lydia (W. part of Turkey, now called Sart). It was a city of great wealth and fame. The river Pactolus flowed through the lower part of Sardis, and it was said to have gold-bearing properties in it. The greatest of the Sardian kings was King Croesus, from whom comes the saying “As rich as Croesus.” It was under his leadership that Sardis reached the zenith of its power and influence, but it was also under his leadership that Sardis was first overrun by its enemies and began to lose much of its former greatness.

-Croesus went to war with Cyrus of Persia (549 B.C.) which became his and Sardis’ undoing. After a futile campaign against Cyrus took place outside the city, Croesus withdrew inside the upper part of Sardis thinking that it was impenetrable and that they would be safe.

-His problem was one of overconfidence and oversight since he failed to guard all entrances into the city as we’re about to see.

-However, because the upper part of the city was built was “friable” rock (prone to cracking and crumbling) a person could scale the mountain through one of the cracks and attack the residents without detection.

-One of Cyrus’ soldiers noticed a Sardian soldier drop his helmet over the battlement, and watched him scamper down the fissure in the rock to retrieve it. Therefore, he discovered the key to the city and they scaled the rock wall through the crack under the cover of darkness and overtook the city.

-Unfortunately for the residents of Sardis they would not learn from their failure to guard all routes into the city since several hundred years later Antiochus, a former general of Alexander the Great, sacked the city again (214 B.C.) in exactly the same manner as Cyrus had done many years beforehand.

-A lesson from this historical look at the city of Sardis is, a little crack left unguarded can lead to a large crushing blow.

-We can readily see how Christ’s words to the church “I will come like a thief” could have conjured up the painful memories of Sardian history, and their ancestors failures to be watchful where it counted most.

II. The Sardis Church Through the Eye of Jesus

2.1. Believing Your Own Reputation versus Hard Core Reality (vs.1)

-One of the key problems facing the church in Sardis was not that they weren’t doing anything (“I know your deeds...”vs.1).

-It is apparent to me that the problem was how they evaluated their deeds and what sense of significance they gleaned from them as a result.

-How they evaluated their deeds was an indicator that the measuring stick they used to discover whether or not they were a good and healthy church was the wrong one.

ILLUS: If you use the power steering dipstick in your car to measure the amount of oil in your engine you’ll end up thinking that you’re out of oil. Conversely, if you use the oil dipstick to measure the power-steering fluid then you’ll get another perspective all together.

- You have to use the right measuring stick to measure the right things.
- What they ended up measuring was their reputation-much higher in their own estimation-versus the real substance of the church, which was much lower in reality from the perspective of Jesus.
- Just what they measured back then we're not told but let's use some imagination and see if we can get a handle on it and then learn from their mistakes.

1. Maybe they measured the quantity of care baskets they gave to the poor versus measuring the quality of relationships those gift baskets were meant to develop. "Hey we gave out 10 baskets last week!"

-It's a good thing to give out care baskets to the poor and not so well off. We should be doing those things.

-But if we only do it out of a sense of duty rather than delight is that good enough? To do it so that we can say that we've done it is not as good as doing it to say that we delight in it.

-When it comes to serving the poor we might well ask ourselves: "Do I see them as my opportunity for blessing or do I see them as my opportunity for boasting? (Motives) Do I look down at the poor and think "How awful", or do I look up as see the face of God and say "How hopeful"? (Mother Teresa approach). Do I see them as only needing me and therefore increase their sense of indebtedness to me, or do I see my need of them and therefore increase my need for their humility and grace?

-What matters not is how many baskets go out to the poor, but how many of the poor know that God is genuinely interested in them through us. They are not our projects, they are people first and foremost; image-bearers of God to whom we owe our respect.

2. Perhaps they quantified the number of days they avoided dealing with persecution and thought that this was an indicator that they were transforming the culture around them.

-Refer to Roman and Jewish persecution of the church in 1st. Century A.D.

-Maybe part of this church's reality was that they wanted a reputation of "niceness" with the community at large and they earned it well enough, but the motive was to avoid dealing with necessary conflict in order to advance the kingdom of God.

-The absence of conflict between a church and the surrounding culture is not a valid indicator of the health of the church, not that persecution towards the church is always an indicator that the church is healthy and on the right track either (J. Wesley)

-Opposition just is, and we should expect it without intentionally going about provoking it or pacifying it when it comes, if that means to compromise biblical truth and ethics in the process.

-Jesus said "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you."(Jn.15:18)

-Because the Jews had a cozy relationship with the Gentile community of Sardis (synagogue backed onto the gymnasium), maybe the Jewish Christians in the church led the charge to follow suit but ended up causing the church to be anemic in its witness?

2.2. The Problem of Mediocrity versus The Pursuit of Excellence (vs.1-2)

-It would seem to me that when Jesus states “I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of my God” (vs.2) what He means is that the church gave up going the whole distance in the pursuit of excellence settling instead for mediocre performance.

-“It is a wretched taste to be gratified with mediocrity when the excellence lies before us” (Isaac D’Israeli)”

-“Life is a leaf of paper white Whereon each one of us may write His word or two, and then comes night.

Greatly begin! Though thou have time, But for a line, be that sublime-Not failure, but low aim, is crime.” (James Russell Lowell)

-Mediocrity is best expressed by saying “That’s good enough.” The pursuit of excellence, however, is best expressed by saying “The best is just before us.”

-Excellence is a pursuit unattained; mediocrity is journey already ended.

-Excellence says “We can do more better.” Mediocrity says “We’ve done enough already.”

-Friends, whatever God has called you to do, do it without fail. Obstacles will come, but they are the means to test our metal of resolve; to see whether we’ll pursue excellence or settle for mediocrity.

-Whatever God asks you to do He has all the power in the world to enable you to do it (vs.1 “seven spirits of God” = fullness of God’s power and presence).

zIII. The Sardis Solution Through the Words of Jesus

3.1. Abide in Me/His Life or give into your own death (vs.1)

ILLUS: Not too long ago we celebrated Mother’s Day. On that day mothers around the city received a bouquet of flowers. My guess is that by now all of the flowers have now wilted and died and have been put into the garbage or composter in the backyards.

However, before that happened for several days or maybe even for a week or so, those flowers were a picture of health and beauty...but were they really?

-Being cut off from the soil/sunshine that constantly feed them to keep the roots, stem and blossoms alive, they are nothing more than the reputation of what they once were.

-A similar problem occurs in the Christian life. We could call it “cut-flower Christianity.”

-When through prolonged neglect and/or disobedience, a Christian/church fails to abide in the life of Christ. It then is like a blossom of cut-flowers in a vase, looking beautiful for a short season, but then giving in to its own eventual death.

-“I am the vine, you are the branches; he/she who abides in Me, and I in him/her, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing” (Jn.15:5).

-Our life is nothing more and nothing less than dependent upon Him who “has the seven spirits of God” = the power and presence of the Holy Spirit who is given to us by the Father and the Son for bearing real fruit in the world.

-The Spirit is our true power source to bring about our individual transformation into Christlikeness, to form us communally into a Trinitarian-like community, and to empower us to make a difference in the communities we are planted in as a result.

3.2. Attend to what you have or lose it to neglect (vs.2)

-Since everything naturally deteriorates over time we must tend to what we have or we’ll lose it by neglect.

-Just what was about to die in the church at Sardis we're not told, but we are told that they could forestall the inevitability of death if they woke up and strengthened what they had.

-If we tend to the hurts of life quickly and thoroughly when they occur, then we'll not lose our relationships of importance by neglect. If we tend to the regular intake of Scripture then we'll not lose the platform of truth under our footing by the termite of neglect. If we tend to the cracks in our character then we'll not be overrun by the enemy of temptation that comes like a thief in the night to steal it away.

-Remember, a little crack left unguarded can lead to a large crushing loss.

3.3. Listen to what you've been told or face the music (vs.3)

-When Jesus says that He will "come like a thief at an hour they will not know" what does He mean?

-If the Sardis church continued to believe in their own reputation and not pay heed to the reality they were truly in, then Jesus said that He would come and close the doors on them since what He values most about any church is whether or not they are abiding in Him and bearing authentic, real fruit that flows from His power, purity, and presence.

-Therefore, they must either listen to what they've been told and hold fast to it, or face the music of their own demise.

Conclusion:

-Road sleep is a real problem facing long-haul truck drivers, not just for themselves, but for others in their path.

-Church-sleep is equal to road sleep but it's a more profound problem since, if left unattended, it results in the death of a kingdom witness within the community it is to bear faithful witness to.

-A church wide awake to its own reputation but dead asleep to its true reality is one that inevitably thinks too much of itself and not enough of the Lord who gave its birth and supplies its power for witness.

-Though the Sardis saints were flirting with spiritual slumber and death Christ held out a rope of hope to this church dangling over the cliff-edge of destruction (vs.5).

-The rope of hope He offered was to abide in the fullness of His Spirit's power and presence (vs.1) so that they would be ever watchful, and kept ever secure in His love and power (vs.5)

For information about Brentview Baptist Church and its ministries,
please contact the church office at:

3512 Charleswood Dr NW, Calgary, AB T2L 2C3

Phone: 403-284-4691 Fax: 403-284-0132 email: mail@brentviewbaptist.com

Website: www.brentviewbaptist.com