



DEAD IN SARDIS: STOPPED CARING OR TRYING

Part 7 of The Seven

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Rev. 3:1–6 | June 03, 2012

Revelation 3:1–6

3:1 “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.’”

THE TEMPLE OF ARTEMIS IN SARDIS

All right. How about if we start with some prayer?

Father God, thank you for a very beautiful day in a lovely country. God, I thank you that we have an opportunity to meet here. God, I pray as well, for this city and this region, and ultimately this country, as the place that we find ourselves here in Turkey is a place of ancient pagan worship, and demonism, and lots of grief in your heart, Lord God. And we pray against the darkness here, and we pray against the darkness in this country. And we pray that what was once a lighthouse for the gospel, would find itself renewing in love for Jesus, and also resurging with an interest in being devoted to you Lord God. Thank you as well, Father, for our hosts. That despite an ongoing archaeological dig right around us at this time, they’ve been gracious enough to allow us to come here. And so we give our time to you, and we thank you that we get to open the Scriptures. And we ask that you would help us to learn them, in Jesus’ good name, amen.

Well, here’s where we find ourselves, friends, we’re in Sardis, Turkey. Look around, it’s an absolutely, magnificently beautiful place. And in the time of the New Testament this was a fairly large city. You’re looking at upwards of thirty thousand people, perhaps, and that’s because they had, essentially, a gold rush. It was rumored that gold was found in this area, and so just as had happened in California, everybody came here for the gold rush hoping to strike it rich. And some, in fact, did. And it may have actually been the place where the myth of Midas, the golden touch, could actually perhaps be traced back to this very region of Sardis. Today, it’s nothing more than just a handful of very small villages. So, as we travel about, you’ll see just hundreds of people, not thousands, not tens of thousands of people. It’s not the kind of glory that it once was. But in its day it was a magnificent place.

And nearby there is the Gymnasium that is being restored by the archaeologists. It’s magnificent and gorgeous. And that was just after the writing of the New Testament, within a few hundred years. Additionally, where we find ourselves right now is just up the hill from what was a very large Jewish synagogue as well. And it was built over the course of many years. A very large Jewish presence in this area.

But where we find ourselves here, at this ongoing archaeological dig, is actually the ancient Temple of Artemis, which is very important to understanding the book of Revelation, the book of Ephesians, and much of Paul’s teaching in the New Testament, as a full two-thirds of the New Testament comes to or from what is modern-day Turkey. And a lot of what was happening in that day, in this region, centered around two primary pagan temples dedicated to Artemis. One is just outside of the city of Ephesus, and there are just a few columns that remain there. It really is not much to see.

And then this is the second major temple here in Sardis that was dedicated to Artemis. And as you can see, there is quite a bit here, including a Byzantine church that is hundreds of years after the writing of the New Testament, just around the corner. As apparently there were enough Christians in this area to plant a church, and they did so right here, taking what had been a place of pagan worship, and idolatry, and demonism, and reclaiming it for the worship and service of Jesus.

But I think it’s important that I tell you about this place. And it’ll be interesting, perhaps, one day to come back and see the rest of the archaeological excavation. This is a very large area, and they’ve been gracious enough to allow us to meet here, even though they’re still digging. But basically, what this was, this was a center for the worship of the goddess Artemis; also, it was a banking and commerce center. And the way these temples worked in their day, they had multiple functions. They were used politically to gain favor with the emperor. It also was used economically as a banking center. It was used spiritually for people to make pilgrimages and to give homage to their gods and goddesses. There are upwards of fifty gods and goddesses

that were worshiped in the region at that time. There would have been smaller temples here dedicated to lesser gods. But the big god was Artemis.

And when it comes to Artemis, what had happened in that day was a number of religious beliefs had really come together. When you're looking at the Romans, and you're looking at the Greeks, and you're looking at those who were native to this area, in that day it was called the region of Anatolia, as you're doing your historical work, each of these people groups had goddesses that they worshiped. So there was Diana, there was Artemis, there was Cybele, there were various goddesses that were worshiped as very powerful.

Even the ancient Anatolians, from whom the Turks are descended, they worshiped the great Mother Goddess. Just like some would say Mother Earth, they had the Mother Goddess, and they had this concept that she essentially gave birth and life to us all, and provided for us. And as we're touring, you may occasionally even see a tree, or a bush, and a bit of fabric that is tied onto it, I don't know if you've seen that, perhaps. Young girls in this region still believe in the Mother Goddess. That she is the goddess of fertility and life, and so they'll take a portion of their dress, rip it off, and tie it to a bush or to a tree, as sort of an homage to the Mother Goddess, asking that she would allow them to marry, or perhaps have children. So it still continues to this day, this homage to the Mother Goddess.

Well, what happened then was the worship of Cybele, and of Diana, and of Artemis, and also of the Mother Goddess, all came together into one powerful feminine deity. And she became the goddess that was worshiped in the entire region, the most powerful of all. So the biggest temples were offered to her. The largest financial gifts were contributed to her. And those who were most involved in the region were somehow connected financially, politically, or spiritually to this temple. So this was headquarters.

And what would happen here was, quite frankly, a lot of demonic activity. And the theology of the Bible is that people are good and evil. And some people love God, and they serve God, and they grow in holiness. Other people don't love God, and they don't serve God, and they grow in unholiness. And just like people, there are spirit beings, called angels. They were created beings to serve God. And some are holy, some are unholy. Some serve God, some oppose God. Some obey God, some disobey God. Some tell the truth, some tell lies. But they're all very powerful.

And so what happens is, when you get a center like this, people would come here, and they would have demonic encounters. They would see dreams, they would have dreams interpreted. They'd have supernatural revelations. Sometimes they'd even experience healing. And so what would happen is, they would have these very profound, significant, spiritual experiences right here, but it was all demonic. Just like in our day, other religions can have spiritual experiences, supernatural healing, miraculous powers, but it's not from God. It's where 1 John says to test the spirits because not every spirit comes from God.

And if you don't believe in the demonic, the truth is, the enemy's already won with you. He's already considered, and conceived a plan by which he could deceive you, and that is to disbelieve in his existence, which is one of his tactics.

And so, what's really sad about Turkey today, it's a beautiful country, with some lovely people, but the demonic darkness is still very thick. And many people still chase after false gods and idols. And it's why, even as we've talked in our time here, out of some roughly 74 million people in Turkey, there's only about 3,500 evangelical Christian converted Turks. You will hear that some are Muslim—and some are Muslim. But it's really Turkish Muslim. It's Turkish Islam. They're still devoted to a bit of paganism, a bit of animism, to the worship of the environment, to the concept of a Mother Goddess, and to power being in created things, not just the Creator God.

And so, here's the big idea, we can read things in the Bible, and it's like black and white, and then we come to the place, and it gets color, and then we do the archaeological, historical work and it becomes high definition. And all of sudden some things in the Bible start to make a lot more sense. Well, that's the cultural, historical context of the first century, right here in the region of Sardis. Lots of worship by the Jews, but not to Jesus. Lots of worship to Artemis, but not to Jesus. A very wealthy area. People who are essentially in it for the gold rush. And there was apparently a Christian church here. The news of Jesus, it spread from Jerusalem. The gospel had come to this place. And some people had become Christians.

JESUS' WORDS TO THE CHURCH AT SARDIS

And so, John is about maybe a four-hour boat ride from here, in modern terms, and he is a disciple of Jesus, and he is on the island of Patmos, and he is exiled. And Jesus shows up to him, and Jesus has a message for the church here at Sardis. So we put this all together geographically. And Jesus, in his ascended state in heaven, he's looking down on the city of Sardis, and he sees what's going on. And he writes a letter to them. And we read that in Revelation 3:1–6.

“And to angel of the church in Sardis write,” and just I'll say this, and it bears repeating, as Jesus gives these seven letters to seven churches, there are certain things that he repeats over and over. One is, “To the angel of the church.” And this is showing us that not only is there physical, human leadership; there is spiritual, angelic leadership in every church.

Friends, you just need to assume this, that what we see is only part of what's going on. Behind the curtain is the supernatural, the invisible, and that is also what God sees. And there are angels and demons, demons are fallen angels and rebels against God, and there is a supernatural battle that is always going on for the hearts of people, and their families, and their legacies, and their cities, and their nations, and their world.

And so Jesus, to each of the churches, says, “I have an angel, at least one angel, who's appointed for the oversight and the protection of that church.” And we don't pray to angels, and we don't consult with angels, but we do believe that God has ministers and messengers, and that's what angels are, supernatural spirit beings that watch over the church, and that do war in the heavenlies against demons. And that would have been absolutely important in this area, as it is in our own hometowns.

He goes on, "The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." Now, this may be very curious because in that day there was a Roman emperor named Domitian, and he thought he was god, he declared himself to be god, and he wanted to be worshiped as god. And he minted a coin of himself, and on the coin it was him with seven stars. And he was showing that he was the ruler of the world and the ruler of the heavens.

Jesus, even though he's in his ascended state in heaven, he not only knows what's going on in Sardis, he also knows that the emperor has made a coin of himself, that a lot of the people who are reading this letter, they've got it in their pocket. It would be like in America today, what does our money say, right? "In God we trust." It would be like Jesus sent a letter to your church, or our church, and it said, "I'm the God in whom you trust." You'd go, "Oh, that sounds like our money." Apparently Jesus is connecting himself even to our currency.

And what he's saying here is Domitian is not lord, god, and savior, and that's what Domitian had called himself. Jesus is saying, "I'm Lord, God, and Savior. He's not the one who rules over the stars, I am." And so Jesus is here showing his supreme, exalted, post-resurrection authority.

"YOU ARE DEAD"

He says, "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead." That's not a compliment. That's like somebody walking up to you and said, "I heard this nasty rumor that you were a nice person." Like, "Oh, really sorry you heard that." He tells the church, he said, "You guys have this really amazing reputation for being alive, but I know that you're just dead."

And some people would say, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." Jesus doesn't abide by that. Jesus writes to the seven churches in Revelation. Some he only has very nice, good, positive, commendations for. Others he has only very harsh, critical, condemnations for. This is a church he has nothing nice to say to or about. This is just a dead church. And he says, "You're dead."

He goes on, "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. 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. Yet you still have a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers," or overcomes, "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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

So, we'll unpack what Jesus says to this church. And it's important for us to always consider, what does Jesus have to say to our church? Would he commend us? Would he criticize us? Would he correct us? What would he say to you individually if he was writing you a letter? What would he say to your family? What would he say to your church?

Here, Jesus has a specific letter. And like I said, number one, there is no, there's no encouragement. There's nothing in there that is praiseworthy. He says, "This is just a bad church." Have you ever seen just a bad church? Just worthless, no good at all. It's a church like that.

Additionally, he has lots of rebukes. He doesn't mention heresy, so they're not into false teaching apparently. He doesn't mention persecution, so they're not suffering. Here's what's happened: they're their own worst enemy. They can't blame suffering, they can't blame persecution, they can't blame poverty, they can't blame anyone. They just don't care. They just don't care. They're completely indifferent. They're hard-hearted, they're stiff-necked. They're simply spiritually dead. Just dead. And it's tragic when this happens to a church.

Just in the US alone, about 3,500 churches die and close every year. How many of you, in your neighborhood, have churches like this? You drive by, nobody's ever going in, nobody's ever coming out, nobody's ever getting saved, nobody's getting baptized, nothing is happening. It's just dead. That's exactly what was happening in the church at Sardis.

Now, in context, you have a large number of people who are converging on the Temple of Artemis. They're very committed to demonism, to pagan worship of the environment, to worshiping false gods and goddesses, to giving their time, talent, and treasure, they're very devoted. And nearby there's a church that just doesn't care about Jesus and just doesn't care about people.

It continues by him saying that they keep meeting, but there's no life in their meeting. Have you been to a church service like that? You just sit there and you wonder, "Why are we here? What are we doing? Why do we exist? Where are we going? Who are we reaching?" These are people who were just going through the motions. Kind of like people who were born in the church, or grew up in the church, and they go out of a sense of tradition, but there's just no heartfelt connection, there's no life-transforming passion, there's just nothing there. That's exactly what's happening.

A FAITHFUL FEW WILL WEAR WHITE

And he tells them that there are a faithful few Christians. And what's interesting, to this very day in this region, there's only a few faithful Christians. There are not enough Christians in this general area to constitute even a church. Just a few Christians. And in that day a few thousand years ago, there were just a few. A few people who did love Jesus. And so when he's rebuking the church he is saying, "But there's a few people there, and I want them to know that I see who they are, and how they behave, and what they believe. And as a result, I don't want to broad-brush everyone; I want to broad-brush almost everyone. And that I want to commend the faithful few that are walking with me."

And here's the truth, I've been to a lot of churches, I've been to a lot of places, sometimes even in the deadest, most compromised, uncaring, hard-hearted, horrendous church, there's still a few people who love Jesus and are good people. Good people in that they love Jesus, and they're walking with him, and they're serving him, and they care. And it's horrible to be one of those people because you know if you leave, it's over. Nobody's caring, you're the only one who does. But if you stay, no one else cares, and you're all by yourself. It's a horrible position to be in as a Christian. It's sort of a

lose/lose scenario.

And so Jesus honors them and he acknowledges that. And he says that if they continue to walk with him they can wear white, and that they will be with him. Otherwise they'll face judgment like a thief in the night. And there was an occasion where a thief had come in the middle of the night to this region, and there was a big heist and a theft. And so they're all aware of that. And Jesus says, "I could come at any moment. I could judge you. Your life could end any second. Don't hesitate, don't delay, have a sense of passion, have a sense of urgency, walk with me in white."

And when you hear the color white in the Bible, it's to show purity, and cleansing, it's to represent forgiveness. When Jesus died, he cleansed us from sin. So friends, we're not just forgiven, we're clean in Christ. You're not defined by what you've done or what's been done to you. You're defined by what Jesus has done for you. And you may feel dirty, you may feel guilty, you may feel unworthy, but Jesus looks at you because of his death and says, "I love you. My death was for your sin. I'll take your sin, give you my righteousness."

And when believers in the Bible are shown to wear white, it's to show that we wear the righteousness, the purity, the sinlessness, the perfection of Jesus. So you see this in places like Zechariah 3, where the people of God get to wear white. You see this in Revelation 19, at the wedding supper of the Lamb at the end of the age, where God's people are wearing white. You see this at a Christian wedding, where, no matter what a woman has done, if she has repented of sin and trusted in Jesus, she gets to wear a white dress. Because why? Because Jesus makes her clean.

And so here he says, "If you come to me, I'm not going to berate you, I'm not going to harm you, I'm not going to condemn you. If you'll come to me, I'm going to cleanse you. We can fix this lifestyle of yours. We could change your heart. We could give you a new life." And this is an invitation from Jesus.

And for those of you who have sin in your life, it's not secret sin. Jesus sees and knows all. And sometimes we don't want to confess our sin because we don't want to get caught, so we'll blame shift, we'll deny it, we'll ignore it, we'll downplay it, we'll hide it. Jesus is saying, "Just bring it to me. I'll embrace you. I'll deal with the sin. I'll clothe you in righteousness and in white. And then you can go live a new holy life as one of my people." That's the invitation that Jesus gives.

HOW COULD WE END UP HEARING THE SAME THING FROM JESUS?

Well, here's what's going on in this area today: There are only a handful of potential Christians. There is no church, necessarily, to speak of. It's no longer a very large, populous area. It's a series of small villages. And the question is: what could compel us to end up hearing this same thing from Jesus? What would compel us, that if Jesus was writing a letter to us, or to our family, or to our church, that he would say, "You're just dead. You're just dead."

And this is different than dry. How many of you have had a season of spiritual dryness? Feel like, "Man, it's a little dry right now." That's different than deadness. Dryness is, "I don't feel like I'm connected to the Lord, and it bothers me, and I want to get beyond that." Deadness is, "I don't feel connected to the Lord, and it doesn't bother me. I'm really not interested in connecting with the Lord." And so, I want to distinguish between dryness and deadness.

But here's a couple ways we could get there, and it begins with how you view the church. Is it something you're born into? See I was raised as a Catholic boy. And some Catholics love Jesus, and I wasn't one of them. But for me, being part of the church was just born into it. Like you're just born into your country. You're just part of a people. But it wasn't a real personal, passionate, loving, intimate relationship with Jesus. Sometimes it's just a social club. It's, "Well, that's where my friends are. And that's where we do business. And it's a good place to network."

Sometimes it's just what you do out of guilt. "I feel bad, and when I do something really bad I go to the church, and then that makes me feel a little bit better. I feel like at least I put in a little God time, or I gave a little God money."

Sometimes as well, the deadness can come from borrowing the faith of your parents, right? If you grow up in a Christian family, or have believing parents, there's a season where, as a child, you're sort of borrowing their faith. But then there reaches a point where you have to have your own. And for some that's the teenage years, sort of, of crisis, and sin, or rebellion, or questioning. But the question is: Do you ever push through that to stop borrowing your parents' faith and have your own faith?

And so, for whatever reason, we can end up in this place of just being dead. So I'll ask you a few questions. Is attending church, or reading the Bible, praying, giving money to the cause of the gospel, fellowshiping with other believers, evangelizing non-Christians, is it routine or ritual? Do you know the difference? There are things that we do all the time, and Christianity is not to be routine, it's to be ritual. Routine is where you just sort of check the boxes of minimal obedience and compliance. Ritual is where there's meaning, and there's value, and there's purpose, and there's mission, and there's passion every time.

Don't raise your hands for this one, but for those of you who are married, there are certain things in life that can be routine, but they should be ritual, right? Every time you sit down to eat together, it could be routine or ritual. It could be just another thing we have to do, or a meaningful moment together. Holding hands. Going on date night. Going to Turkey. Whatever it is, it can be routine or ritual if you're with someone you love.

If you don't really love them, if you don't really know them, if you're not really pursuing one another, you're not really cultivating the friendship; it's just routine. We get up, we have breakfast, we go to work, we come home, we finish the chores, we do the dishes, we go to bed.

The exact same thing can be happening in the relationship of another couple. They could be doing the exact same things, but for them, it's ritual. They

wake up glad to see their spouse. When they sit down to eat, it's a meaningful connection, and they're conversing. When they're away from one another over the course of the day, when they gather together at night and they rejoin after the day's work, they're looking forward to it. You can see it in their eyes. They're happy to be together. They're happy to reconnect. That's ritual.

The same thing that happens in our human relationships can happen in our relationship with Jesus. It can be routine. "I went to church. I read the Bible this morning, I went to church, I tithed 10 percent." Or it could be ritual. "I love Jesus, he loves me. I'm getting to know him, he already knows me. We're growing in our relationship. I look forward to the opportunities that I have to build that relationship with him." And one of the ways that individuals, families, and churches become dead is what is supposed to be ritual becomes routine. What is supposed to be ritual becomes routine. And if it's routine, eventually you just stop doing it because there's really no passion for it.

Number two, are your affections aroused by God? Are you one of those people that you spend enough time in prayer, and with the Holy Spirit, and in the Scriptures, to be passionate? We tend to be passionate about things that we invest our time and energy in. We tend to be passionate about people that we get to know and take the time to invest in.

And so the question is: With Jesus, how are your passions? Are your passions and affections aroused? How many of you truly know some people that they have genuine passion for Jesus? They just do. When they talk about him, their eyes light up, their voice goes up, they're just excited. It seems to them that he's a living person and a friend who is in their life. And so they relate to him in a way that is very different from religion.

It's not just dutiful check-boxing, and moralism, and "do this, don't do that." There's a heartfelt, emotional, passionate, affectionate connection. And if you don't have that, you don't have to fake that. I tell you, don't fake it, but instead get your time with Jesus. This is silence, solitude, prayer, Bible reading. This is also getting time with other believers who do love Jesus and are passionate. Because sometimes when we're all by ourselves it's like a stick that's taken out of a fire; after a while it's just going to go cold. The key is to huddle up with the people of God and to also capture some of the passion that they might have for us.

Number three, are there any parts of your spiritual life in which you're just going through the motions? It is, again, just that duty, and some of you were raised in homes like that. To where, your parents would say, "Read the Bible," but they said it in such a way that it sounded like, "Read the phonebook." Right? It was just something you had to do. "Get ready, we got to go to church. We got to go to church." Like, what? Like we got to go to traffic court, right? We have an appointment and we have to be there, otherwise we get in trouble.

The issue is Christianity is not a bunch of have-to's; it truly is a bunch of get-to's. If God does love us, if his ways are good, if he is a loving Father, then he invites us into community with him and his people. He doesn't command us to do something that is unpleasant. He invites us to do many things that are pleasant.

And this really comes down to your view of God. And for those who were here and Christians, apparently it didn't seem like anything that they were really interested in. So though they had a church, they had a relationship with God and one another that was really more akin to just a moral compliance and religious obedience.

And the sad, cold, hard truth is that most churches, I think, are that way. And I don't mean to broad-brush every church, but about 80 percent of churches are plateaued and declining, just in the United States alone. And the same is true in many nations. And what that is, is usually an older generation of guilt-ridden people going through religious exercises. And young people don't care because there's no passion, there's no mission, there's no affection, there's no compulsion, and guilt doesn't last a lifetime. Guilt cannot sustain faithful walk with God for a lifetime. It has to be love, it has to be joy.

Number four, do you really care about Jesus and people? You think about it, I mean, here we are. The Temple of Artemis was one of the great wonders of the world. The one in Ephesus was named one of the seven great wonders of the world. There are people coming from, at least in that day, all over the region and from other nations to this place to worship a demon god, led by a guy who emasculated himself. And if at the end of the day you wake up as a Christian and say, "I don't see any opportunity. I don't see any need. I don't see any mission." You have systematically, intentionally just closed your eyes to the problem.

But this is what happens all the time. Because see, we get on a plane and we come halfway around the world and we see an obvious need. Yet when we get in our car and we drive to work, we don't. We don't. We don't look at our neighborhoods and say, "There's an obvious need." We don't look at our family, friends, coworkers, and say, "There's a big opportunity." We don't drive by our own temples: strip clubs, grocery stores, movie theaters, sports stadiums.

Were the people who lived here two thousand years ago to get on a plane and fly to your town and mine, they would see our temples. They'd be sitting right now at, let's say, a football stadium, or a baseball stadium, or a basketball arena, saying, "Look at all the money these people spent to make this massive, massive construction project happen. Look at all the passion they brought to it. They showed up early. They stayed late. They gave lots of money for entrance fees. And they worshiped, they worshiped the leaders like gods. So they put the names of the sports stars on the back of their jerseys. And they cheered them like Greek gods."

And see, what happens is, idolatry is what we tend to see in other cultures and miss in our own. And so one of the good things about coming to a place like this is we see the obvious need, and we look around and we ask, "How could a church not see this? How could a church not care?" And then we need to ask, "What am I not seeing? Where am I not caring? Where are the opportunities that God has given me that I simply am just too busy, dead, indifferent, or hard-hearted to really care?" And it happens to all of us, friends. It happens to me too.

Number five, would it really bother you if your church died and closed? Would it really bother you? Have you ever thought of that? Sometimes I have this nightmare that Mars Hill Church, where I get to pastor, ceases to exist. What if it ceased to exist? That would destroy me. I would be devastated. All these people, all these families, all these new Christians, all these children, all these church plants, all these opportunities. What if it all went away? It would destroy me.

Yet there are some people that the death of their church, it does not bother them. I'll give you guys some examples. I won't name names, though that would be exciting. But I know of one church, the church had literally died. They'd been in decline for decades. So they decided, "We're going to give the building away." And it came down to, there was a list of godly, Bible-believing churches that requested the building, and also there was a basketball league that made a request for the building. And the church voted to give the church building to the basketball league. And when they were asked, basically, "Why basketball?" Their answer was basically, "We like basketball." So a church no longer meets there. Jesus is not worshiped there. But it's basketball. There's nothing wrong with basketball. But basketball's a really bad religion.

There was another church I was working with, and for over twenty years they've declined every single year. All the young people have left. They've missed budget, I think, twenty-two years in a row. And so they hired a young pastor who did love Jesus, and he started making changes, and so they attacked him and fired him. Because new people were coming. And that changed things because now the way they did life together was different. Service time changed. Music changed. Somebody painted a wall. "We need to fire the pastor." And they did. He's a very godly man.

EVERY LIVING THING CHANGES

And let me tell you this, every living thing changes. This? This isn't going to change much. It's the same as it was basically two thousand years ago. It's because it's dead. Dead things don't change. Living things change. I've got a five-year-old son, in five years, he's going to change. I've got a thirteen-year-old daughter, in seven years, she's going to change. Anything that's alive changes. It either grows or dies. So the question for churches is not: Will there be change? The question is: Will the change be for life or death? Will it be for forward progress or for sinful rebellion? There's going to be change.

And so I would just ask you, I know that you're scattered from many churches, and even for those who call Mars Hill home, is your first inclination to resist change? Is your first inclination to argue for tradition? Is your first inclination to keep things that are familiar to you, comfortable to you, or to rejoice that there's a new opportunity for new people to meet Jesus, and so change is a good thing?

Otherwise, we really don't have this attitude of parents. And for those of you who are parents, would you agree that having a child forces change? What changes when you have children? Everything. Your schedule, your budget, your health, your sleep. But you welcome that change because there's new life, and so you're willing to be inconvenienced. As Christians we want to welcome new birth (babies) and new births spiritually (Christian converts). And then we welcome them into church.

And what that requires is change. Things have to change. And if we're dead, we fight the change. And if Jesus is alive, we embrace the change. And Jesus' word to the church here was, "You're dead. You are not changing, but that's because you're dead."

Couple other things in closing, and I know it's hot, and I appreciate your time. I'll say this to you, what happens is it goes from a movement, to an organization, to an institution, to a museum. This is what denominations do. This is what churches do. So God the Holy Spirit works. There's a movement. Then you've got to organize it, so there's an organization. You start a church, or a missions agency, or a denomination.

And then what it becomes is an institution. An institution is not about the future, it's about the past. It's not about pushing forward; it's about defending what we've already obtained. And they start talking about the good ol' days, and the glory days, and, "Do you remember when?" Well then, step number four, it becomes a museum. There's not a future. There's not a mission. There's not a passion. There's not a life. We just talk about what used to happen. And this is a hard word, but I think it's a good word.

As we go back to our homes, as we go back to our churches, as we go back to our ministries and lives, we've got to ask ourselves, "Do I want to be part of a movement or a museum? Do I want to be part of something that is growing and changing, or something that has already died and is just telling the stories of what God used to do a long time ago?"

And as we go to these sites, and we look around, it's beautiful, it's interesting, it's historical, it's magnificent, but it's all museum. And Christianity is about learning from the museums. But it's about being part of a movement, and staying on the mission of God of seeing disciples made and churches planted.

And I just feel inclined to even tell some of you who are here, and some of those who will be listening in, you need to repent of your attitude. Your criticism, your self-righteousness, your judgmentalism, your suspicion toward leadership, your preservation of tradition. Because at the end of the day, what you're arguing for is control. You're not in control, that's why Jesus ascended into heaven. He's got the control issue mastered. You and I just need to be faithful and obedient, open and willing to personally change, and to welcome change in our church, so that more people can meet Jesus. So that someday, in two thousand years, tourists don't get on a plane from another nation to fly into your city and talk about how you failed.

So we can't just look at these historical examples and criticize these people, we need to say that we're capable of the exact same failure. And to take that to heart, and go back to our churches and say, "We want this place to be alive. We want Jesus to be made much of. We want new people to meet Christ. We want legacy, and generation, and tradition. And we want to hand to our children and our children's children, we want to hand to them a living faith, not a dead set of rituals, traditions, and routines."

WAKE UP AND REPENT

And that's the big word that Jesus has for the church at Sardis. So he says, "Wake up." It's like they'd been asleep. "Strengthen what remains but is near death." Take anything that looks like it's a possibility and invest time, resources, and energy into it. He says, "Remember the truth." Because oftentimes we believe lies.

He says to repent. And friends, this is an invitation. What Jesus is saying is even if you're dead spiritually, or your family's dead spiritually, or your church is dead spiritually, or your denomination, or your network, or your movement is dead spiritually, you can repent, you can turn it around, things can change, it's never too late so long as you're alive. And so there's hope. There's an invitation. There's an opportunity that God gives through repentance.

He says, for those who are believers, to keep going, to persevere, to walk in holiness, to wear the white righteousness of Christ, and to not get discouraged. And especially for those of you who are in hard places and tough churches, and I know even some of you are leaders in churches that if Jesus didn't call you there, you'd never show up. Because the fighting, and the religious people, and the arguments, and the inanity, and the silliness, and the pettiness, and the traditionalism, and the ritualism, and the me-ism is overwhelming. And he says, "Just keep going. Just overcome. Keep plugging forward. Be faithful. Do the best you can."

And he says to listen to the Holy Spirit. Something he says to each of the churches. The way that we keep spiritual fervor, passion, and life is to listen to the Holy Spirit. He speaks through the Word of God. He speaks through circumstances. He'll sometimes give us impressions and leadings. He'll sometimes speak through other believers, and circumstances, and authors, and teachers.

And as you walk with the Holy Spirit there will be certain times you'll hear something, it'll just, it's like it gets highlighted in your soul, and you'll realize that was from the Lord. That's what he's talking about in hearing the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice and they listen to me." The longer you walk with God, his voice gets familiar. And through all the noise and clutter of life, when the Holy Spirit speaks you're like, "Okay, I got that." And it is more intuitive. It is more personal. It is more a matter of defining who God is and then listening to him. But what this takes is time. And for those of you who are new Christians, what it takes is time. It's getting to know someone named God.

And Jesus says, "If you don't do this, I'm going to take your name out of the book of life." And what he's saying is, "You're going to hell, and I'm shutting your church down." Now you think that would have lit a wick, right? You think somebody, on Sunday, can you imagine that, church is all together. Pastor says, "We got a letter from Jesus in heaven." Awesome. Open it up. "I heard this nasty rumor you guys were alive." "Uh-oh, that's not starting very well. Well, what happens if we don't obey you?" "I'll send you to hell and shut the church down." You'd think at that point somebody would have raised their hand and made a nomination that we do something. But sometimes it doesn't happen. And so the word for us today is a sense of urgency. It's a sense of passion and compassion.

And also, as we close our time in prayer, I want to, number one, pray for a church that is in the region. There is, there's not a church in the immediate vicinity, but in the extended region there is a Christian church. So we need to pray for those brothers and sisters. God obviously cares about this area. He's named it in the Bible.

And number two, for us to ask ourselves, when we go home to our church, "Do I really believe that this church is here for me, or that am I here for God and his people, and his mission? Is this just a place where I want to get baptized, and bring my kids, and raise my family, show up at Easter and on Christmas?"

Because here's what kills a church: more consumers than contributors. That's what kills a church. Every church has consumers. Non-Christians, new Christians, people who are in rebellion, people who are coming along. And the faithful people are supposed to be the contributors. Where a church starts to die is when there are more consumers than there are contributors. There are more takers than there are givers. More people demanding things than giving money. More people demanding service than volunteering hours. More people demanding commitment than prayerfully contributing to the forward progress and the well-being of the church.

ARE YOU DEAD OR ALIVE?

So I would just ask you, number one, where are you? Are you dead or alive? Are you dead or alive? And number two, when you go home, who is there that is dead that you need to speak to? And Jesus speaks to the dead people. The spiritually dead. Physically alive, spiritually dead, and he says, "This is wrong. This is unacceptable. This cannot continue. Things need to change right now." Is that your church? Is that friends, family, coworkers, neighbors, spiritual leaders, is that your own network, your own movement, your own denomination, your own tradition? And we need to follow in the boldness of Jesus, receiving a hard word for ourselves and repenting of any deadness we have. And then modeling and mirroring Jesus' example and speaking boldly, compelling people who are spiritually dead toward life.

I'll pray for you. I love you guys. I appreciate you guys coming out from all over the world to learn. And I don't want this for us to just be a bunch of archaeological facts, but a bunch of archaeological facts that ignite our heart to go back home and be the church of Jesus Christ, so that there's a legacy two thousand years from today where we are. And that's why we're here.

So, Father God, thank you for our time together. Thank you for your living Word. Thank you for the church of Jesus Christ. Jesus, you love the church, and we want to love what you love. You serve the church; we want to serve what you serve. We pray for this region, God, and the church that is in this greater region, not this city. We pray for that little church and the leaders there, that they would be faithful. And God, we pray that we would

receive this word for ourselves, ways in which, perhaps, we are dead, and need to be brought back to spiritual life through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. And I pray for our churches, Lord God, that they would not be dead, that they would be alive. That we would embrace the change that growth and life brings. And not fight for the cessation of change that death brings. God, we love you. We thank you that hard words produce soft people. And God we ask that these hard words would help us to be soft. And God, as the founding pastor of Mars Hill, I pray for our church, that it would not be a church that one day just talks about what used to happen. But that it would always be a church that talks about what's going to happen next. In Jesus' name, amen.

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.