

Sermon #221  
Revelation 3:1-6; 14-22  
September 17, 2017

## A Wake-Up Call

### Slide 1: title slide

It's the tale of two churches. Both were on the same circuit sharing the same pastor. Both were United Methodists and neither was large. Both existed in small rural communities in the mid-west. But that's where the comparisons stopped. We'll call them church A and church B.

Church A was fairly prosperous financially and took good care of their facilities and their members. They considered themselves a highly spiritual church. And yet, they were also an inwardly focused church that functioned like a small cleft. A lay leader domineered the church by running the meetings and controlling the pastor. This man wasn't really in touch with God, although he thought he was. The members didn't want Bible studies, and they weren't interested in growing spiritually. They weren't interested in reaching out to their community. A social club mentality prevailed throughout the church. They were closed to new ideas and lived predominantly in the past. Whenever new ideas were suggested, they often responded, "We've never done it that way before."

Church B was in the small community just up the road from Church A. This church wanted to grow and reach out to their community. They were friendly, inviting, and energetic, and had several young families with small children. In one Bible study, a lay leader, who was excited about learning God's word, said that he felt the tingling sensation of the Holy Spirit as the hair on the back of his neck stood up. That's how excited he was to study God's Word and put it into practice. The pastor enjoyed ministering at Church B, but never felt comfortable in Church A.

Today, Church B is a thriving, growing church that reaches their community for Christ, but Church A no longer exists. Surprise, surprise! I knew about some of this, because my dad was the pastor of both churches. But I didn't know that it was Church A that forced my dad to leave and the conference didn't support him. And unfortunately, church A dominated church B. So, we moved on after only three years. Church A needed a wake-up call. They needed an urgent, direct message like two churches in the book of Revelation, the vision that John received of Jesus Christ.

### Slide 2

We are currently in a sermon series on the seven letters from Jesus to the seven churches in the book of Revelation, a vision that John received while in exile. We've said that these messages read much like report cards, evaluating the status of each church and encouraging them to stay strong in the faith. Last week Jordan preached on two churches that received good report cards, Smyrna and Philadelphia. Today, we look at two churches that received bad report cards, Sardis and Laodicea, who needed a wake-up call. What might we learn from them today? Do we need a wake-up call too? Since these church settings are so similar, we will look at a composite of both.

### Slide 3

#### I. Both churches were in pitiful condition

##### A. Sardis

The Sardis church was in a wealthy city on major trade routes in southern Asia. It was well protected with a cliff behind them and a huge wall and gates in front of them. They didn't need help from anyone, or so they thought. Twice in their history they were surprisingly attacked and defeated. But by the first century, their glory days were somewhat behind them, even though they remained a prominent city just a little north of Ephesus where Paul began the first church in that area.

In this setting, the message comes to the church at Sardis from the one who holds God's seven spirits and the seven stars – that is Jesus himself. And to the church of Sardis he goes right to the jugular from the start. *"I know your works,"* he says. *"You have the reputation of being alive, and you are in fact dead"* (v. 2). Imagine that you are in that congregation when the messenger reads this letter. You think you are going to hear good words of commendation, but instead it begins with a stinging rebuke. Instead of being alive as you thought, you are in fact dead. Or at least as the message continues, you are on the brink of death. Your works are far from complete. Your jaw drops half way to the floor and you look for a place to hide. Surely, the messenger brought the wrong letter. But then you remember him saying, "Write this to the angel of the church in Sardis."

A few years ago, I was asked to be a consultant at a UM Church here in West Ohio. Many of you remember our own consultation process back in 2012 where consultants studied our church and then gave us prescriptions to work on. This church went through the same process about three years after us. The weekend seemed to go well and on Sunday morning we presented the prescriptions to the church. Afterwards several people were quite surprised by one particular prescription, and they weren't happy, to say the least. But the study didn't lie. The prescription had come from a genuine concern or problem in the church that needed fixing. Jesus often comes to each of us as individuals or as a church and says, "This is a growth area. Let's work on this area together." Our first response is often a defensive one. We don't know how the Christians at Sardis responded, but we today have a chance to respond affirmatively.

In summary, the church in Sardis was an apathetic, complacent church that was almost dead. They had accommodated themselves too much to the secular community around them and thought they were invincible. They didn't need Jesus.

##### B. Laodicea

The church in Laodicea was also in a prominent, prosperous area. It was forty miles southeast of Philadelphia and one hundred miles east of Ephesus on a major trade route. Laodicea prospered under Roman rule and was one of the wealthiest cities in south Asia. They also worshiped many Greek and Roman gods. But the citizens of

Laodicea were quite self-sufficient. Twice the city was ruined by an earthquake and twice they rebuilt it themselves refusing help from Rome.

In this setting, the message comes to the church of Laodicea from the “words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation” – once again, Jesus himself. And he begins similarly, “*I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I’m about to spit you out of my mouth*” (3:15, 16).

Wow, just when we thought that the Sardis message was bad enough. I imagine that the people in this church probably fainted hearing that rebuke. Some elderly lady probably had a heart attack. A young man choked on his chewing gum. Here again is a great shock. Expecting to hear praiseworthy news, the church receives a stunning rebuke. And what was the problem? They were lukewarm. Few desire lukewarm tap water, right? It’s interesting that the city of Laodicea had no natural water supply, relying instead on piping their water in through an aqueduct making the water weak and undesirable. The lukewarm water was also used as an agent for inducing vomiting. They could relate well with the concept of undesirable, lukewarm water that was spewed out of the mouth.

Apparently, just as the church in Sardis, the Laodicean church had also given in to the self-sufficient ways of a prosperous, self-reliant city. They too, were complacent and lukewarm. Jesus said that he wished they were either cold or hot, but not lukewarm or nominal. Jesus said to them, “*You say, ‘I’m rich, and I’ve grown wealthy, and I don’t need a thing.’ You don’t realize that you are miserable, pathetic, poor, blind, and naked*” (v. 17). This makes me think of the line in the hymn, God of Grace and God of Glory: “Cure thy children’s warring madness, end our pride to thy control; shame our wanton, selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul.” Could this apply to the condition of the church in North America today? Might we be like the Laodicean Church or the Church of Sardis? What would Jesus say to us today? Well, let’s go on to the remedy for these complacent churches. Both messages contain a remedy.

## II. There was a remedy for both.

### A. Sardis – Wakeup from your sleep and lethargy.

Jesus says to the church in Sardis, “*Wake up from your sleep and strengthen whatever you have left*” (v. 2). They didn’t realize that they were asleep spiritually and needed to wake up. Nor did they understand that they were almost dead and had to strengthen the little they had left.

### B. Laodicea – Buy gold refined by fire.

To the church in Laodicea, Jesus gave the prescription to “buy gold from me that has been purified by fire so that you may be rich, and white clothing to wear so that your

nakedness won't be shamefully exposed" (v. 18). This was not a quick, easy fix. It would take hard work, a purification by fire. They needed the purity of white clothing.

So, what is the remedy for a lukewarm nominal church or Christian today? When referring to a passionate, vibrant church, it is important to note that we are not talking about doing more and more work for God and getting overworked and burnt out. That's not it at all. Nor are we referring to a church where everyone is happy and elated all the time with no cares in the world. No, that is unrealistic. For Sardis and Laodicea, the remedy had to do with repentance – a changing of their attitudes, lifestyles, and behavior. The word for repentance in Greek means a changing of the mind in a 180 turn around. And both churches received a double imperative call to change. Sardis was to "obey it and repent" (v. 6). Laodicea was to "be earnest and repent" (v. 18).

The way forward for the modern church also begins with repentance, turning away from complacency and self-sufficiency. It continues with witnessing, getting involved in mission to the community and beyond, giving generously even with a vision in mind, and meeting with other Christians to publicly worship God. Church A that my Dad pastored primarily focused on themselves, and prayer and Bible study were not desirable. But prayer is the very heartbeat of the church. We are only as strong as our prayer life. And without knowing the Word of God, we have nothing to stand on. A church without prayer and Bible study is not only complacent, but almost dead.

Tom Rainer has studied many churches across the U.S. In one study, he discovered twelve ways that churches can keep from dying and learn to thrive. It's not surprising that one of those reasons is a lack of prayer life. He and his team interviewed many churches that had closed, and at one of those closed churches, a leading lay person told him. "There was a day when prayer was powerful in our church. People would pray before the worship services. Small groups spent a lot of time in prayer. We prayed intensely for our community.

"But then our community started changing. We were afraid. Many members sold their homes and got out as quickly as they could. We started focusing on the fear. We stopped serving the community. And we stopped praying with the passion we once had." No prayer, no hope. How is your prayer life? Are you studying God's Word?

The churches of Sardis and Laodicea received very bad report cards. No As, only Ds and Fs. But they were prescribed a remedy, indicating there was still hope. No matter how far the church or the individual Christian has strayed, there is still hope.

### III. There is hope for both churches.

#### A. Hope for Sardis

In Sardis, some had not soiled their garments, meaning they had not given in to the idolatry and the sexual immorality of the secular community (v. 4). And white robes of purity were available for all who repented (v. 5).

## B. Hope for Laodicea

Laodicea was given the opportunity to buy gold refined by fire and to also receive white robes to clothe them. Christ still loved them and gave them an opportunity to be corrected in discipline. And Jesus himself stood at their door knocking. I'm sure you've seen the paintings of Jesus knocking on the door or you've read verse 20 here and think Jesus seeking unbelievers. There is truth in that of course, but the context of this metaphor shows that he is knocking on the door of Christians, who have shut the door on him. There is no latch on the outside of the door. He knocks and persistently keeps on knocking, but it's up to us to listen and open the door. There is still hope. He's still knocking.

On this national back to church Sunday, some of you may have come back to church for the first time in a while. We're glad you are here. You are making a good step in the right direction, but like the churches of old, we are not perfect. I think you will find that our church is alive and vibrant. We are a church that does pray. We also study God's Word and reach out to the community and beyond by making new and growing disciples of Jesus Christ. And for those who are watching by Facebook, we are grateful that you are with us today in that way. And we encourage you, if you can, to come and join us on Sundays as we worship God together and let him to continue to transform us into the people he calls us to be. There is hope for all of us!

## Conclusion

So, Church A or Church B, which one do you want to be? In what ways do we need to "wake-up" to Jesus' message of tough love? There is hope to be God's people, fully passionate, and fully committed to him.