

LETTERS: Jesus' Letter to Sardis
Revelation 3:1-6
March 18, 2017

Introduction: Diane Langberg, a prominent Christian psychologist who specializes in the areas of trauma and abuse, relives a sobering story she learnt while in Africa. She writes, "While I was in Ghana a couple of years ago for a conference on violence against women and children, we visited Cape Coast Castle. Hundreds of thousands of Africans were forced through its dungeons and through the door of no return onto slave ships. There were five dungeon chambers for males, and descending into the darkness to one of those dungeons felt claustrophobic. Two hundred men shackled and chained together lived in that dungeon for about three months before being shipped across the Atlantic."

Langberg continues – "We stood in one of the male dungeons listening in the darkness to the whole horrific story when our guide said this: 'Do you know what is above this dungeon?' Our heads shook. 'The chapel.' Directly above two hundred shackled men – some of them dead, others screaming, all of them sitting in filth – sat God worshipers. They sang, they read the Scriptures, they prayed, and I suppose took up an offering for those less fortunate. The slaves could hear the service, and the worshipers could sometimes hear the slaves (though there were those making them behave so as not to disturb church)."

In response, Langberg states, "It took my breath away. The evil, the suffering, the humiliations, the injustice were overwhelming, and the visual parable was stunning. The people in the chapel were numb to the horrific trauma and suffering beneath them."

Body: The church in Sardis to which John was writing believed the very same lie that those who attended the chapel services above the slave dungeons believed – that they were spiritually healthy or spiritually alive, when in reality both of these congregations were spiritually dead.

Although the Sardian church considered itself to be alive and perhaps was even well respected by other churches in the region, Christ Himself sees this church for what it truly is, which He states in the latter part of v.1, which says, "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

It's clear to see why the so-called Christians worshipping above the slave dungeons were trapped in a state of perpetual spiritual death, but what precisely was causing this state of spiritual death for the church in Sardis? I believe the reason for their spiritual death was their unwillingness to witness to the unbelieving culture around them. I think that it is safe to say that the Sardian Christians were reluctant to proclaim the name of Jesus partially due to pressures being placed on them by the secular culture. By maintaining too high a Christian profile in the city, the church would have been more susceptible to persecution, much like those the other churches endured in previous letters. The church in Sardis was not willing to suffer for the sake of Christ in the face of adversity. Their reputation was not what they thought it was.

What exactly is our reputation?

Over the course of the time I've been on staff, I have heard from several members of TBC that our church is highly respected throughout the community and region, which I do not doubt. However, what *specifically* is TBC's reputation and how does it align with the reputation we want to have in the sight of Jesus Christ?

I would be willing to bet that if we put out a poll asking the people of Jamestown to tell us what comes to mind when they think of Temple Baptist Church we would hear things such as, *They are the church that puts on the Passion Play. Or, That's the one where Randy Jaspers is pastor. Or, That's the big church up by the high school.* None of those identifying factors are bad in of themselves, but if those are the sole indicators of TBC's reputation not only in the community, but in the sight of God, then we must take a long hard look at what we as a body of believers need to change.

I would be willing to bet that the majority of the community would be able to list similar identifying factors for other churches in Jamestown, e.g., where the church is located, who the pastor is, and what events they put on in the community. What are we doing in Jamestown that other churches are not doing? We cannot be content with simply being recognized. So, what must take place? First and foremost, Temple Baptist Church's reputation in the sight of our Sovereign Lord must consist of a body of believers who bear witness to the glory of our risen Savior Jesus Christ who took on Himself the punishment that was ours to receive so that we could be freed from death. And the more we begin to self-identify with this desired reputation, and the more obedient we become to Jesus' call on our life to tell the spiritually dead living right next to us about the freedom we have in Christ that can be theirs as well – the more our reputation will transform in our community. My desire for TBC is to have it known by the community of Jamestown as a church who loves people and makes disciples rather than simply being the big church up by the high school.

My goal this morning isn't to guilt trip you or even discourage you as I know that several people in this congregation are making great strides to advance the Kingdom of God. The point I'm trying to make is that we must *not* allow our secular culture to manipulate us, through the use of shame, the fear of being labeled as intolerant, or by any other means, to keep us from witnessing about the saving power of Jesus Christ to a culture that grows further and further away from Him.

A verse that has been on my heart and mind a lot lately as I consider the many lost people in our region of North Dakota is Romans 10:14 where the apostle Paul asks the questions, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" Temple Baptist Church, we are the means through which Jesus Christ brings people into relationship with Himself.

It's time to wake up

The church in Sardis was also the means through which Jesus Christ would bring people into relationship with Himself, but John tells us that the Sardian believers were not holding up to their end of the bargain. They were not living as a though they had been purchased by the blood of Christ as they formerly had been, but had become lethargic to their responsibility to the Gospel.

Jesus says in v. 2-3, "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."

To put it bluntly, the church in Sardis had lost enthusiasm for doing what Christ had called them to do. Another word that could be used to describe the state of the Sardian Christians is lethargic. When I worked as a hospital chaplain I spent a lot of time ministering to families whose loved ones became unresponsive. When we think of someone being lethargic it is essentially the same thing as being in a deep state of unresponsiveness. They were inactive and without life. For this reason, John exhorts them to remember the earlier commitment they had made to Christ and to recall the strength and zeal that they once had in proclaiming the Gospel.

I started attending youth group at TBC in the Spring of 2003 and became a regular church attendee, along with my family, that following Fall. As I think back to my earliest memories of TBC the first thing that comes to mind is how many of you went out of your way to get to know me and took your time doing it. There was a genuineness and sense of authenticity that drew me to our congregation. There was a tightness of a close-knit community that existed in this congregation, which not only brought me closer to you all, but produced in me a desire to serve the Lord more fully.

Friends, I love you all, but we have allowed our former reputation of a tight-knit community go slack in recent years. In my opinion, this not only negatively impacts new comers to our church, but has produced a lack of fruit when it comes to our witness about Christ and making disciples. I think far too often there exists this unspoken mindset that Temple Baptist Church has made a solid reputation for itself and that it can now simply coast on the good it has accomplished in the past. Our present reality is that people no longer feel a sense of duty or obligation to attend church, let alone have a personal relationship with God.

And if you're like me, then you get mad that people no longer adhere to Christian principles like they once did. Yet, if our anger is not motivated by a sense of righteous responsibility to the cause of Christ then, just like the church in Sardis, our work is not found to be complete in the sight of God. To state it simply, we need to stop complaining about how unbearable non-Christians are and start witnessing to them. This *us versus them* mentality has the word sin written all over it and for it there must be repentance. Are we all not in need of the Savior?

Jesus instructs the believers in Sardis to remember the life to which they have been called, to keep it – or obey it, and then to repent when they fall short of their calling. V. 3a gives the solemn reminder – developed from the parable of the thief in Matthew 24 – that Jesus will return unexpectedly and that we must not be caught living a lack-luster unintentional, purposeless, passionless, self-gratifying life if we hope to keep the all-powerful God from coming against us.

Do not compromise your calling

In Revelation 3:4 we read that there were only “a few” followers of Christ in Sardis who had not compromised their calling to witness about the saving power of Jesus. They were the faithful few that had been committed to the task. Jesus uses the image of soiling their garments to describe the Sardian Christians who were suppressing their obligation to the Gospel. Think about that for a moment – the image Jesus used to describe the *majority* of the Sardian Christians is the same one I would use to let Sarah know that our almost one-year old daughter pooped her pants. In both accounts, a stain is left.

Most of the Sardian Christians shirked their responsibility as believers to witness about Jesus Christ by assuming a low profile in their pagan culture. Friends, most of the church in Sardis kept their heads down and their mouths shut when it came to witnessing about Christ to the lost people that they encountered day after day after day after day. I would be willing to bet that other than the few Christ followers whose garments had not been soiled, the rest of the Sardian church would have been indistinguishable from the god-less society in which they lived.

One of the most humbling comments I ever received came when I was a freshman in college and had been back home spending time with friends from high school. As we were outside playing catch, one friend, that was still in high school at the time, made a comment about how a mutual friend of ours had given his life to Christ and had, in his words, *become extremely lame*, ever since that time. As I began to defend our mutual friend’s devotion to the Lord, I shared with my friend that I too am a Christian to which he responded with the short phrase that I will never forget, *Really? Since when?* Friends, I had been a Christian for roughly seven years at that point and from my high school friends’ response, it is clear to see that I too kept a low profile. My life, at least up to that point, had been indistinguishable from how my non-Christian friend lived his.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, stop hoping that the lost person who you interact with on a daily basis will eventually see that you are a follower of Jesus and start telling them you are one. One quote that is often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi is, “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words.” This is wrong. Yes, we need to live in a way that is contrary to how the non-believer lives, but we need to use our words to tell others about the truth of God’s Word. I think far too often we feel as though we are fighting an up-hill battle when it comes to witnessing about Jesus to a skeptical and, at times, belligerent, culture. But, we can take heart in knowing that the Holy Spirit is providing us continually with life-giving power – the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. It tells us right there in Revelation 3:1 – the seven spirits

of God, that are held by the Son Jesus, burn on the lampstands, which is the churches and enables them to shine brightly in their bold witness to a dark and unbelieving world.

The Gospel is not some mystical, hypothetical truth that exists to make us feel good and to weed out those we do not like. The apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:16 that (the Gospel) “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” And he says, for this reason that he is not ashamed of it.

Folks, when we, through the power of the Holy Spirit, overcome our temptation to lay low and keep our mouths shut and start to take the risk of witnessing about the transforming power of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ then, as we read in v. 5, the Son promises that He will never blot out our name from the book of life. Jesus writes that for those who bear witness to saving power, He will confess their name before His Father and before His angels.

Conclusion: Friends, no matter how many times I read Diane Langberg’s retelling of the dungeons at Cape Coast Castle where people – those made in the image of God – were chained and shackled for months at a time before being sent across the Atlantic Ocean to live as slaves it makes me cry.

And after the initial outrage I experienced as I considered the so-called Christians worshipping God in the chapel directly above the dungeons wore off, I was struck with eternal heart wrenching grief that our reality here in Jamestown is little different than it was at Cape Coast Castle a few hundred years ago. Without Spirit-filled witness many will be chained and shackled in the dungeon. The only difference is that while one lasts a life-time, the other lasts an eternity.

Jesus’ final instruction to the church in Saris reads, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Friends, if you have never witnessed about Jesus Christ before or it has been a long time since you have done so, the Holy Spirit demands that we wake up from our slumber and get to work making disciples in the name of Jesus Christ. Temple Baptist Church has had a good reputation for many years in our community, but God is done with us yet. Let us allow the Holy Spirit to strengthen in us what remains so that when Jesus confesses our name to His Father and before His angels our reputation as people loving, disciple-making, Christ exalting followers of the Word of God will be the words resounding from our Savior’s voice.

Amen.

