

# Empty Words and Empty Worship

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

23 June, 2024

## Children's Talk: Coming Alive

Today we are going to read a letter that the Lord sent to a church called Sardis. This letter is about how they think they are doing really well but they actually are not doing as well as they think. They need to pay more attention so that they can fix what is wrong. Here is the letter:

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write,  
"These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars:  
'I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not wake up, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but 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.'" (Revelation 3:1-6)

The first thing the Lord said is that they had a name that they were alive but they were actually dead. That means they thought they were very alive spiritually, and maybe other people did too, but on the inside they didn't have any life.

This has to do with worship: when we worship and say the right things spiritually, but on the inside don't really care about them. To show this I want two volunteers. Now I want you both to kneel down here and fold your hands like you are praying. Close your eyes and bow your heads. Now, one of you think about what you are going to do later today. The other one think about the Lord. Can we tell that they are doing anything differently? No! They both look like they are praying. But on the inside one is actually praying and the other one is not.

The Lord doesn't just want us to go through the motions: we can come to church and say prayers and talk about the Lord and know a lot of stories from the Word and sometimes because we do all those things we even think we are better

than other people. But that's just on the outside. On the inside we are not doing the right thing at all. The Lord's invitation is to wake up! Or in other words, to start paying attention on the inside. When you pay attention to your prayers, and think about the Lord, and truly intend to live the things you learn in church, then you are alive spiritually. *Amen.*

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Today we are going to look at two letters sent to churches in the Book of Revelation. There were seven in total, but today we will focus on to: the letters to Thyatira and Sardis. Each one of these letters describes a certain group of people in the Christian world and invites them to more fully become part of the Lord's church on earth. We do this not by signing a membership role or even through baptism: we only join the Lord's church when we begin to live the things that He teaches. Each of the letters to these churches paints a picture of people who on the outside seem like they are good people but lack the substance to back that image up. We'll get into some details about what that looks like and how we can relate.

But first let's read the letter to the church of Thyatira. The Book of Revelation can get confusing very fast. As you listen to the letter it won't be obvious how it speaks to you and your life. Don't worry. We'll go through it in detail and I think you'll be able to connect with it by the end. This is from Revelation chapter 2:

And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write,  
"These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass: 'I know your works, love, ministry, faith, and your endurance; and as for your works, the last are more than the first. Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works.

"Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come. And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—

'He shall rule them with a rod of iron;

They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter's vessels'—

as I also have received from My Father; and I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”  
(Revelation 2:18-29)

We'll start at the beginning. This letter is from the Son of God, and He has some pretty good things to say about the church in Thyatira: He praises their love, ministry, and endurance, and notes that their works have been improving. These are people who are growing in faith and in love.

But then the Lord begins to point out that they have a problem and it seems to be severe: they allow the woman Jezebel to teach and seduce the servants of God. Jezebel is almost certainly a reference back to one of the worst leaders of Israel, Queen Jezebel, who led the people of Israel away from the Lord and attempted to murder all the prophets of the Lord. When this letter refers to Jezebel it's referring to the people of the time who led people away from the Lord to commit adultery and to worship idols. On a deeper level Jezebel is an image of something that resides within each and every one of us. She stands for natural pleasures or desire: the desire to have it our way, to be lazy, to put all of our focus on pleasure and lose sight of anything that might be more important. Just as Jezebel dwelt among people who were generally good, this desire for pleasure dwells within us even when we are mostly on the right path.

Now if we just wanted to be selfish and we didn't care about what other people thought we could just go off and seek pleasure with no shame. When we are on a path towards being a better person and that really matters in our lives the pursuit of mere pleasure becomes a stumbling block in a much more nefarious way. Rather than outright getting us to be selfish jerks Jezebel seduces us with promises that we can have it both ways: that we can both be a good, upstanding spiritual person in one sense but not change our lives much at the same time. In short, that

superficial pursuit of pleasure gets us when we think we can get credit for what we believe without actually living it, so we can have our faith on the one hand but still pursue our selfish inclinations on the other.

So what does that look like? In some cases it can be very overt. When someone claims that they have been saved and can never lose that salvation no matter what they do, that can become an excuse to do evil things. But this mind-set affects all of us in one way or another. Take for example someone who thinks he's good because he firmly believes in love from the bottom of his heart: he is deeply moved when someone is in distress, he wholeheartedly believes in compassion over profit, he is devoid of racism and only wants the best for all people. That sounds like a great guy, right? But what if those all stop as deeply held beliefs and never translate into action? What if most of his life is made up of spending time at parties, spending money, and never lifting a finger to fix the problems of the world? His good intentions have been co-opted by his desired lifestyle. No matter how deeply he holds his convictions they mean nothing if they are not lived.

The Word itself, or the Bible, can even be used as an excuse to separate beliefs from actions. The Word teaches us that God forgives all sins. Even before you have committed it God has already foreseen and forgiven you (and all of that is true by the way). But it is easy to take that a step further and say, "Well, I know I shouldn't have cheated, but I'm already forgiven, so I won't worry about it." That's using the Word to separate faith from charity. Or we see that the Word says don't judge and we decide that it would be judgmental to not hang out with people just because they lead really disreputable lives. In doing so we separate our belief that what they are doing is reprehensible and make it allowable to spend time around them without ever once making an effort to stop them. When we use the Word or the

teachings of our church to justify not living what we believe we have been seduced by Jezebel to turn from the Lord and worship idols.

This is what the Lord is warning the people of Thyatira about: you're on the right track, but watch out, because you also have this desire for pleasure that could trip you up. Now the Lord isn't interested in criticising people who make this mistake. He's trying to help us and he shows us exactly how. In His letter He even says that He gave these awful people a chance to repent. Anyone who overcomes this evil and actually lives their belief would receive power to rule over the nations with a rod of iron. That power comes to us when we actually pay attention to what the Word says, because although Jezebel tries to seduce us, the reality is that the Word is quite clear on the matter. Listen to this passage from the teachings for the New Church that addresses how much the Word contradicts us when we think it gives us permission to not live what we believe:

The fact that those people see things contrary to their doctrine is apparent from a thousand places in the Word where we are told that evils are to be abstained from and good deeds done, that people who do good deeds go to heaven and people who do evil deeds go to hell, and that faith without works is lifeless and diabolic. But the question is, what part of the Word did they falsify? Or in what way did they commit sexual immorality spiritually with the Word? The answer is that they falsified the entire Word, inasmuch as the entire Word teaches nothing else than love toward the Lord and love for the neighbour. For the Lord says that "on these two commandments hang the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:40). (*Apocalypse Revealed* §136)

Every last part of the Word teaches us to love the Lord and love our neighbour. We can do neither of these things if we don't put our beliefs into action and do good works. If you ever feel that the Word is giving you an excuse to not live what is true, it isn't. Period. Just do the right thing.

The letter to the church of Sardis contains a similar message: you think of yourselves as good without actually doing anything to demonstrate it. But with Sardis it's not so much when we find an excuse to not put our beliefs into practice. It's when

we successfully practice all of the things that make us look spiritual without putting much effort into a good life. I'll read the letter first and then we'll get into what that means.

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write,  
"These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars:  
'I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not wake up, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but 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.'" (Revelation 3:1-6)

The first thing that the Lord says is telling: you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. In other words you have a reputation for being spiritually active, but really you're not that spiritual at all. The classic example of this would be the person who goes to church every Sunday and looks down on everyone else who is not as "spiritual" as they are. Any activity that we think of as being spiritual can pull us into this mindset. There's going to church, reading spiritual books, meditating, doing yoga, listening to sermons, reading the Word, praying, studying the doctrines, even things like recycling, and many more. Any of these activities that culture or we in our own minds label spiritual can become a name or an indication that we are living spiritually.

But the reality is that unless we back these things up with real action we are not spiritual in the slightest. Consider this parable that Jesus told about a master and those wanting to come into his house:

When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from,' then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and



You taught in our streets.' But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity. (Luke 13:25-27)

So these people come to the door (presumably of heaven) and say let us in! And the Lord will say nope, I have no idea who you are! And so they'll say, what are you talking about?! We ate and drank with you and you taught in our streets! But he'll just say nope, still don't know you, you workers of iniquity. And people would have this mentality that somehow because they spent time with Jesus that made them better people: listening to the Lord in the streets and eating with Him is like coming to church and spending time with Him in your mind and going through the motions and almost having this pride by association. You can imagine that some of Jesus' followers were puffed up because *they* got to sit with *Jesus*. But that last line is key: get away from me you workers of iniquity! The Lord does not know evil doers. Coming to Church, listening to the Lord, reading the Word, none of it has any effect on us until we live it. It is only then that we know the truth, and so the Lord. We only come to know the Lord in doing good by living the truth. That's real worship.

The solution the Lord offers to the people of Sardis is to wake up! Pay attention! Don't get caught resting on your laurels. Listen for the truth, and when you hear it, live it. Coming to church for example doesn't make you a good person but it does give you an opportunity to learn something about how to live better. Meditating won't suddenly make you spiritual, but it's a good time to reflect and listen for the voice of conscience, the voice of the Lord. The Lord isn't saying stop doing all those other things: He said strengthen the things that are about to die, in this case, all those external rituals of worship. Without a life of goodness and love those rituals are dead. But *with* a life of charity they can be alive and strengthen our dedication to truth and to goodness (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* §123). So stay alert! When you are going through your spiritual practices, whatever they may be,

don't just go through the motions. Ask yourself, "What am I learning from this experience?" And then take what you learn and live it. That's how you live spiritually.

We've now looked at two groups of people: those who don't back up their beliefs and those who don't back up their spiritual practices with real loving actions. The point here is not to think who we know that we can put into these categories, the point is to look within ourselves to see if we have these flaws, and if so to repent of them. The Lord is calling us to be a stronger part of His church on earth. If we put in the effort on our part He will pull us through, and give us the gift of heavenly life.

*Amen.*