

Reigniting the Flame: Passivity Revelation 3:1-6

I. Introduction

There is something about our fallen nature that drives us to passivity...to withdrawal when we should strongly move, to isolate when we should engage, to choose safe numbness over risky love.

We also discover this sin of passivity in the Christians living in the ancient city of Sardis that we're going to explore today. Over seven weeks, we're going through the seven letters to seven different churches found in the Bible book called Revelation. Each letter reveals to us what attitudes and actions please God, and which ones break God's heart.

Let us pray...

II. Scripture

Revelation 3:1-6

3:1 "To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

4 Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 Those who overcome will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out their name from the book of life, but will acknowledge their name before my Father and his angels.

6 Those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

III. The Sinful Passivity of Sardis

Understanding the situation in the city of Sardis at the time this letter was received helps us to understand the application of this letter to us.

The city of Sardis was a wealthy and important city. It's location on the junction of five roads made it an important center of trade. The making and dying of woolen garments was one of its major industries. This is why Christ uses the illustration of "being dressed in white" to speak about the imputed righteousness of the faithful believers there.

The other helpful thing to know about Sardis is that it was located on an almost inaccessible plateau. This made it an ideal military center. But it also leads to its downfall. Because of its great wealth, and its sense of impenetrable security, the people became arrogant and slack. This allowed the city to be captured twice in its history. On both occasions, the enemy troops scaled the precipice at night, and easily overcame the overconfident Sardians.

Christ uses this history to illustrate to the Christians in Sardis their spiritual condition. The Church there was wealthy, well established, and large, and so they assumed they were also a healthy, fruitful Church.

But Christ's evaluation of the church was this... *"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."*

I get the image of a really large, tall steeple, wealthy, historic mainline Church like "First..." something or the other, who thought they were "all that," and who probably did a lot of social justice ministry, but who really were not engaged in Spirit-led, Christ-centered, gospel-proclaiming, God-glorifying ministry.

And in God's eyes, *being* good and *doing* good, does not a Christ-follower and authentic church make! As one commentary described them... *"They were decent people with a dying witness and a decaying ministry."*¹

And Christ's rebuke to them was severe... *"Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.* Doing the right things is not pleasing to God. What delights God is doing the right things for the right reasons.

Christ's warning was equally severe... *"But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you."*

Christ again is making allusions to the enemies who had snuck into Sardis in the middle of the night. In the same way, Christ will come to them like a thief in the night, and catch them unaware in their overconfident arrogance.

IV. The Sin of Passivity

So how does the situation in the church in Sardis apply to us? We could pull out many applications. But in this sermon, I invite us to wrestle with just one key area... the sin of passivity.

I am using that term in this way. The sin of Passivity is whenever we choose self-protection over love, stagnation over ongoing spiritual or relational growth, apathy over engagement, or complacency over the pursuit of excellence for God's glory.

¹Wiersbe, W. W. (1996, c1989). *The Bible exposition commentary*. "An exposition of the New Testament comprising the entire 'BE' series"--Jkt. (Re 3:1). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

Passivity creeps into our life as a congregation, into our relationships, and both are driven by our personal passivity. So let's explore passivity at these three levels.

V. Corporate Passivity

The church in Sardis was "resting on its laurels." It was most likely a church plant by the Apostle Paul. It was once a vibrant, dynamic, soul-winning, disciple-making, community-influencing local congregation. And it still thought it was!

But it was coasting the glory of past generations, and forgot that each generation must claim its own glory. Like every human organization that fails to renew itself continually, it had become institutionalized. It had lost sight of its gospel mission, and was settling for a good-deed doing mission.

This happens to every congregation that exists for many decades. And so every congregation to remain vibrant must perpetually reclaim its mission and refocus its ministries. That is God's cure for passivity on all three levels... *"Wake up! Strengthen what remains.... Remember....what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent."*

Through our missional renewal five-year plan we are "strengthening what remains," of our 119-year heritage of fruitful ministry, we are "remembering" and reclaiming our Biblical mission of evangelism and discipleship, and we are "obeying" God's fresh vision.

VI. Relational Passivity

Another area where the sin of passivity does great damage is in our relationships. We commit this sin in whatever way we fail to pursue continual enrichment of our close relationships. Close, healthy, satisfying relationships do not come naturally. They are the fruit of ongoing intentional enrichment.

This is true in our relationship with God, family, friends, and our spouse. We're not going to go into any detail on this matter. But to put it simply...you must have a plan for how you will keep your relationships strong, especially your marriage. It will not happen by default!

Please hear this truth well: Good relationships only happen by design!

It requires making use of the many excellent relationship enrichment resources we have available to us as American Christians. It requires scheduling the time to use these resources. It requires making time to talk a walk, to turn off the tv and play games with family, to have date nights, to have meaningful conversations with your friends, to process conflict in healthy ways, etc.

If such relationship enriching activities are not scheduled, they will most likely not happen. Life and love are war, and our sinful nature, the domain of darkness, and this ungodly world will always squeeze out what is most important unless we have an intentional battle plan!

So here's my question... When it comes to enriching your relationships...what is your plan, and when is it on your schedule?

VII. Personal Passivity

Now both cooperate and relational passivity flow out of our tendency toward personal passivity. There is something inescapable about our sinful side that is perpetually drawn to passivity...

...to withdrawal when we should strongly move,
...to isolate when we should engage,
...to choose safe numbness over risky love.

To love is to be hurt, so we wall up our heart and love only as little as we have to.

To long for what we cannot have this side of heaven aches too much, so we kill off our longings.

To expect too much of God, others, and ourselves has only led to grief and disappointment, so we lower our expectations to expect very little.

Many choose the opposite to sinful passivity of violent movement, but this path is equally sinful.

To love is to hurt, but instead of withdrawing from relationship, they engage in many relationships but keep them shallow.

Or they still long for the perfection in all things that we were created for, but they have not embraced the reality that we live in the already-but-not-yet.

And so they still live with a demandingness that God, life, themselves, and others give them perfection and the fullness of what they desire.

Or instead of passive withdraw, they choose the violent movement of anger, ambition, conflict, or promiscuity.

Passivity is what leads a man to not pursue relational intimacy with his wife. So his wife keeps upping the ante of seeking such intimacy. They eventually reach the classic situation of the passive husband and the overbearing wife.

Or...the wife stops longing at all, which is equally tragic.

Passivity is what leads men and women to addictive behaviors as a way of escape and control. Passivity is what produces "Zombie Christians" who live narrow little petty legalistic judgmental unappealing, joyless, passionless lives!

Passivity is epidemic in the youth of America. This is especially true of our young men. Many of whom are choosing the cowardly escape from fallen reality of fantasy. Instead of the risky engagement of imagination that shapes fallen reality for redemptive purposes.

VIII. God's Cure for Passivity

What is the cure for passivity? We've already declared it...our Bible passage reveals it..... *"Wake up! Strengthen what remains.... Remember....what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent."*

The "Four "R" path of overcoming passivity:

- **Recognize** your sinful tendency toward passivity.
- **Reject** passivity!
- **Repent** continually of passivity or its opposite, violent movement
- **Reenter** the battle of life and love empowered by the Holy Spirit and God's Truth!

IX. God's Reward for Sacred Engagement

Each letter that we are exploring in Revelation includes an eternal promise for those that remain faithful throughout their life to Jesus Christ. Each promise always relates somehow to the situation of the Christians to whom Christ is writing.

The promise given to the faithful remnant of true Christ-followers in Sardis is that their names are forever recorded in the Lamb's Book of Life. This Book of Life is found throughout the Old and New Testaments. It is the record of all those whom God has chosen for eternal life in God's kingdom.

The original hearers of this letter would have understood this truth, but they also would have noticed the allusions to other books they contained registries of names, and this would have added additional meaning to this promise.

So let's explore those three references...

"The Jewish people kept accurate records in regard to vital statistics. When the Jews returned from exile, lists were drawn up for the registration of families.False prophets were completely ostracized and banned from the land of Israel."

It was also common practice that cities would keep a census registry in books, and when people died, their names would be erased from these books.

Thirdly, "the Romans would erase the name of a criminal from the records before they put him (or her) to death. Likewise, Christians who refused to worship Caesar as Lord were considered convicts who would lose their citizenship" and have their names removed for these registries of citizenship.

It was to people who knew these three uses of such book of registries that Christ wrote... *"Those who overcome will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out their name from the book of life, but will acknowledge their name before my Father and his angels."*

This promise would have been received by them, and should be received by us in three ways.

To those in Sardis who just assumed they were Christians because they were church members, or because of being a good person, but had never personally turned their hearts and life over to Christ and Lord, this promise would have been heard as a warning...the same warning Christ extends to some of you right now...

“Don’t just assume your name is in the Lamb’s Book of Life...make sure it is!”

To those who had never heard the gospel, as clearly it wasn’t being proclaimed very well in the Church at Sardis, this promise would have been heard as a grace-filled, gospel invitation from Christ...the same invitation Christ extends to some of you right now...

“Come to me all who are weary, and living in fear of death and judgment, and I will give you peace and assurance of eternal life.”

And to the faithful Christians in Sardis, who were laboring in perseverance and who remained faithful to Christ even within a dead church, and who may have been doubting their assurance of salvation...

Jesus assures then that their names would never be erased from the book of life!

This promise is often twisted by Armenians, those who dangerously insist one can lose their salvation, as a threat that one can have their name erased from the Book of Life. But this verse does not say that at all. It is not written as a negative threat, but as a positive promise that the elect, those who Christ chose for salvation, can never have their names erased.

This promise is further confirmed by what the Apostle John says elsewhere in Revelation about the Lamb’s Book of Life. In Revelation 13:8 and 17:8, it is revealed that all those destined for salvation already had their names recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life even before the world was created!

Before you, or anyone was born,
...before you had the opportunity to commit a single sin
...or do a single good deed,
...before you even heard and accepted the gospel,
...in God’s eyes and plan you were already saved,
...already God’s adopted and beloved child.

If you have been given the gift of faith and grace to have surrendered your life to Christ, then rest in this truth: You cannot behave or believe your way into salvation, and you cannot sin your way out! Brothers and sisters, those of you who know you have turned your heart and life completely over to Christ as Lord and Savior, and who are faithfully serving and loving God with all your heart, you too can claim this promise...

Your name is permanently recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life because it is written with the permanent marker of Christ’s blood!