

# Know Christ Personally: The Church at Sardis

## LHC: Message Eighteen (980614PM)

### Week 18: Know Christ Personally

(Revelation 3:1–6 — The Church at Sardis)

This week as we approach the end of days, you can find hope as you make sure that you know Christ personally!

#### SUNDAY: Professing without Possessing

*“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘**I never knew you**; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’ ”*

—Matthew 7:21–23, emphasis added

Sardis was a church planted in a very famous city of the ancient world—the home of Aesop and his fables. Situated at the junction of five roads, commanding the Hermus Valley, thirty miles northwest of Philadelphia, Sardis was a very wealthy commercial city. It had been the capital of King Croesus, who was proverbial for his riches. The city’s easy wealth apparently made them lax when it came to being alert to possible dangers.

Because Sardis lacked preparedness, it was conquered twice: by Cyrus the Persian (549 B.C.) and by Antiochus (218 B.C.). The city was built on a hill so steep that its defenses seemed impregnable. Yet on both occasions, enemy troops scaled the precipice by night and found that the overconfident Sardians had set no guard.

John does not mention anything like the persecutions at Smyrna and Pergamos, or the heresies of the Nicolaitans. It is worth noting, however, that this church differs from those at Pergamos and Thyatira, which also had mixed memberships. In those churches the unsaved members were in a minority, but at Sardis they were predominate. In Christ’s letter to the Sardian assembly, He stated that only a few of them had not defiled their garments and thus were worthy to walk with Him (Revelation 3:4).

When Christ visited the church body at Sardis, He said to them, *“I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead”* (Revelation 3:1c). He reached out to check their vital signs and, as the great Bible teacher Dr. Lehman Strauss once put it, “The Great Physician felt their pulse [and] pronounced them dead.” They had degenerated from holiness to phoniness.

Oh, the dreadful condition of being artificial! Many people know only the appearance and not the reality of Jesus Christ. Do *you* know the difference between appearance and reality? God does! In every generation He has had to pronounce this woe against certain ones: *“These people draw near Me with their mouths, and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me”* (Isaiah 29:13).

Think of the excruciating eternal impact of being busy and active in the church—but ending up unknown by Jesus Christ! Is your heart in the same place that your mouth is saying you are? You talk and sing about the Lord, and perhaps even teach a class, but does your *heart* belong to Him?

**My Prayer for You This Week:** *Dear Lord Jesus, as You wrote this letter to the church at Sardis, You warned about the danger of those who professed something they never possessed. And while You were here on earth, one of Your constant emphases was dislodging people from a false sense of security—those who thought they were in the kingdom because they were Abraham’s seed, circumcised, going to the temple, sacrificing, giving, and serving—but had no heart for change. We pray that You would show us that the only true riches are in possessing Jesus Christ. To profess a knowledge of You, and yet to not possess that life-giving, life-changing, born-again relationship with You, is the most horrible deadly condition we could be in. Oh Lord, open our eyes to behold Your wonderful truths! Thank You for the blessing of Your Word! Let Your Spirit pierce our hearts with the assurance of true riches in Christ. We pray in the lovely name of Jesus, and for His glory. Amen.*

## **MONDAY: Professors Not Possessors**

*“Remember . . . how you have received and heard; **hold fast and repent.**”*  
—Revelation 3:3a, emphasis added

Jesus spared no words to convey His utter contempt for religious charlatans producing only the false fruits of self-righteousness. Perhaps the strongest warnings ever uttered in His earthly ministry came from the heart of the loving Savior whenever He came across phonies—the religious fakes, the “stuffed shirts,” the con-men and women with false pretenses who only appeared to be His. Some of His most graphic illustrations were about these Christian look-alikes.

Jesus warned: *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves”* (Matthew 7:15). Such people live for their own desires—like animals. Instead of loving and serving others, they “use them,” like objects, for their own gain. Jesus called them fruitless trees that were to be *“cut down and thrown into the fire”* (Matthew 7:19).

Jesus said that it does not matter whether you have made a profession, been circumcised, joined a church, or been baptized. None of those things really matter if you aren’t a genuine fruit-bearer for Christ. Are you bearing fruit? The evidence of salvation is not reassurance from your parents that you prayed for salvation as a little child, or someone else saying, “I remember when you went forward at that crusade, and you wrote it in your Bible.” You are a Christian and will go to heaven if the Spirit of God is bearing fruit in your life. When Jesus came and knelt beside the still and cold body of the church at Sardis and felt their pulse, He pronounced it dead.

Jesus pointed to the shocked church workers who never really knew Him personally: *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father”* (Matthew 7:21). Fruit bearing is a result of a transformed heart, an internal prompting that longs to do the will of God. Though

no child of God can perfectly or always do His will, there is an ever-growing desire that says: “No longer I, but Christ—not my will, but Yours be done.”

At the beginning of Matthew 13, through the story of the sower and the seed, Jesus compared the church to a grain field. The seed falling on the first three types of soil represents people who are not truly born again. Only the seed in the fourth type of soil represents One who will go to heaven. Some people bring forth a little fruit, some more; however, everyone who is born again produces fruit. You cannot get to heaven without salvation; this involves a true saving faith that changes your life and results in godly fruit.

When we lead people to Christ, we will know that they are really saved if they start bearing fruit. A lot of people *profess* Christ but do not *possess* Him. So in Matthew 13:30, Jesus tells us, “Let those who profess to love Me stay in the church. At the harvest, the judgment, they will be gathered up and burned.” His verdict: fire, judgment, and hell for those in the visible church who do not bear fruit.

Jesus says that those who profess Christ but do not possess Him, are like “fancy cups fouled with filth on the insides”: “*Woe to you . . . hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside . . . are full of extortion and self-indulgence*” (Matthew 23:25–26).

This is a damning sin. This is the person who measures everything by what it will do for himself—whether a job, relationship, or service. Jesus was talking about people who tithed and went to the temple every day. But He saw through their hypocrisy.

Jesus described such people as “*whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness*” (Matthew 23:27). Believers are filled with life that is endless, but lost people are walking coffins filled with death.

**The wages of sin is death.** There is a barrier between man and God—man’s refusal to acknowledge God’s prior claim to his life. Mankind is self-centered instead of God-centered. The Bible identifies this as rebellion, and calls it sin. Furthermore, the Bible declares that “*the wages of sin is death,*” but God offers a solution: “*the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 6:23). Through the gift of His only Son, whose death on the cross paid the penalty for man’s sin and rebellion, *God went the limit*. Now comes your part.

Are you willing to admit that God is right when He says you have rebelled? Do you recognize your need of a personal relationship with God? Because Jesus took the penalty for your sins, trust God that He will forgive you and give you eternal life. Accept the Bible’s invitation: “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved*” (Acts 16:31). The Bible also says that “*if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved*” (Romans 10:9). Simply speak to God and tell Him you want to change the direction of your sinful life by receiving Jesus. That is the repentance God wants to work in your life. Then confess Jesus as your Lord, and you will find true living hope for the end of days as He produces the fruit of His salvation in your life—His love, His joy, and His peace.

## TUESDAY: Some Horrible Biographies

***“If you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.”***

—Revelation 3:3b, emphasis added

These Sardians professed the truth without possessing Christ personally. God says that such hypocrites will face this final end: *“His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat [the fruit-bearing ones] into the barn [heaven]; but He will burn up the chaff [unsaved ones] with unquenchable fire [hell]”* (Matthew 3:12).

There are many Scripture writers who record horror stories of **false believers** who are called dogs, pigs, wolves, thistles, fire, and rotten fruit. All of these are destined for destruction:

- **The Cains** grow up near paradise, hearing about God from faithful parents, but do not choose to know the true God. They depart, and never look back at Jesus Christ. (Genesis 4)
- **The Esaus** sell an eternally valuable spiritual inheritance for a moment of fleshly desire. They find no place of repentance, and thus miss the heavenly city. (Genesis 25–38)
- **The Balaams** want to die the death of the righteous, but live the life of rebellion and greed. They, too, will be going to hell. (Numbers 22–24)
- **The Pharisees** face damnation because they live hygienically sterile lives, having an exterior holiness but corrupted and rotting hearts. (Matthew 23)
- **The Judases** live around Jesus for years, hearing and seeing Him daily, but inwardly they only grow colder and harder by the year. (John 19)
- **The modern-day liberal churches** are the dead, liberal, cold, and lifeless churches that keep the gospel in a coffin. But, alas, the Great Physician pronounces *them* dead!

Is it possible in this great era of the church that your heart is also cold, dark, and empty? In the cathedral of Lubeck, Germany, there is an engraving from the Middle Ages entitled “The Lament of Jesus Christ Against the Ungrateful World.” The engraving from that church wall, copied below, beautifully reflects our Lord’s teaching on this subject:

*Thus speaketh Christ our Lord to us,  
You call Me master and obey Me not,  
You call Me light and see Me not,  
You call Me the way and walk Me not,  
You call Me life and live Me not,  
You call Me wise and follow Me not,  
You call Me fair and love Me not,  
You call Me rich and ask Me not,  
You call Me eternal and seek Me not,  
If I condemn thee, blame Me not.*

Ponder this message today: God *hates* profession without possession. Beware if you are merely a pretender. The only one being fooled is you, not God. Stop and do what Paul advises in 2 Corinthians 13:5—examine yourself. Look for evidence that the Holy Spirit lives within your life. His presence brings love for God, spiritual hunger for the Word, a desire to repent from sin, a longing for holiness, and a genuine desire to serve and sacrifice for others.

### WEDNESDAY: When Jesus Visits

*“His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and **His eyes like a flame of fire.**”*

—Revelation 1:14, emphasis added

What did Jesus say to the assembly at Sardis? He told them, “I want you to meet with Me again. I am the Lord Jesus Christ, and I know everything about you.” Jesus stood by them, waiting for a pulse, saying, “You are in church, and appear to be alive, but when I check your pulse, there is no life.”

Jesus is all-knowing, all-powerful, and ever-present. He is the One who sees and knows all as He speaks to the churches; He is the One who holds their message, their witness, and their existence; and He is the One who stands by their lampstand.

Look again at verse 1 of Revelation 3: “*I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.*” Note that Christ gives no approval to the Sardians. God won’t tolerate phonies; nor will He tolerate mere caretaker-Christianity. His way is life, growth, and fruit—or nothing. They were dead; their deeds were incomplete. They were still reciting the creed, saying their prayers, but the fire was absent. Remember: “*Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart*” (1 Samuel 16:7c)!

Their deeds had not come to maturity; there was no fully formed fruit. They were dying in the bud, an unformed fruit dropping that was worm-eaten, stunted, and dying.

Jesus appealed: “*Be **watchful**, 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***” (Revelation 3:2–3, emphasis added).

### Consider these five imperatives from the Lord of the Church:

1. **Be watchful.** The word “watchful” (*agrupneo* in Greek) that Jesus uses in Revelation 3:2 expresses the idea of “being wakeful, sleepless, as the watchfulness of One who is intent upon a thing.” It comes from two Greek words meaning “to chase sleep.”
2. **Strengthen that which remains.** The word “strengthen” is often in Paul’s writing. It means “buttress, build a strong support, get grounded.”
3. **Remember.** “Remember” (a present imperative) means “keep on remembering the Word of God.”
4. **Hold fast.** This basically means to “keep on, never stop, be not wavering, do not be on again and then off again.”

5. **Repent.** Repentance is the answer—the hope not only for the Sardians, but also for us today. Make a conscious choice to say no to sin by definitive action once and for all.

Our Lord called upon the few faithful at Sardis to be vigilant. He urged them to strive to strengthen and revive what remained but was at the point of death. Sardis was conquered twice, which should serve as a warning to us to not be overconfident as Christians. No commandment appears more frequently in the New Testament than this: “Watch.” We must therefore be watchful, continually on guard, so that we don’t lose our first love.

## **THURSDAY: How to Defeat the Devil Daily**

***He who sins is of the devil. . . . For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.***

—1 John 3:8, emphasis added

It has been said that “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty”; similarly, it could be said that “eternal watchfulness is the price of salvation.” Watchfulness should be the constant attitude of the Christian life. *It is high time*, said Paul, *to awake out of sleep* (Romans 13:11). He exhorts: *Watch, stand fast in your faith, be brave, be strong* (1 Corinthians 16:13).

**Watch out for the prowling lion—Satan:** *The devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour* (1 Peter 5:8). The Christian must constantly be on the watch against the wiles of the devil (Ephesians 6:10–13). The history of Sardis had its vivid examples of what happens to the garrison whose watch is slack. As Christians, we likewise face continual attack by the powers that seek to seduce us from our loyalty to Christ. Often these attacks are subtle; therefore, we must be ever on guard. God expects us to resist or fight Satan. We are never to turn our backs on our battles; there is no defensive gear in the armor of God to cover our backsides. Face the devil; resist him using the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit, the armor, and prepared feet (Ephesians 6:14–18).

**Watch out for the crouching monster of sin.** In the Christian life there must be unceasing vigilance: “*Watch and pray*,” said Jesus, “*lest you enter into temptation*” (Matthew 26:41). Temptation waits for our unguarded moments and then attacks. Sin, however, is even worse than Satan. Satan is defeated, so all we have to do is this: (1) speak the Word of God; (2) resist; and (3) stand our ground. (See James 4:6–7.) But God says that sin is *so bad* that we must run or flee from it (2 Timothy 2:22), and then He will deliver you.

**Watch out for the unexpected coming of Jesus.** The New Testament repeatedly urges Christians to be on the watch for the coming of our Lord: “*You do not know on what hour your Lord is coming. . . . What I say to you, I say to all: Watch!*” (Matthew 24:42–43; Mark 13:37; 2 Thessalonians 5:6). In my own life, the greatest deterrent to sin is that I do not know when Jesus is coming. I stay watchful because I do not want Him to come and find me doing something that dishonors or displeases Him.

**Watch out for your “last day.”** No man knows the day and the hour when eternity will invade time for him. “The last day is a secret,” says Augustine, “that every day may be watched.” A man should live every day as if it were his last.

We must also avoid the permeating evil of false doctrine. The Christian must be on the watch against false teaching. In Paul’s last address to the elders of Ephesus he warned them that grievous wolves would invade the flock from without and within, and men would arise to speak perverse things. “Therefore,” said Paul, “watch!” (See Acts 20:29–31.)

**Respond to the tireless eyes of Jesus.** Never forget that even as we must watch for Jesus Christ, so Jesus Christ is watching us! “I have not found your works perfect,” said the risen Christ, “in the sight of my God” (Revelation 3:2). Christ is looking for something from us. We so often regard Him as the One to whom we look for things: His strength, His help, His support, His comfort. But we must never forget that He is looking for our love, our loyalty, and our service.

The things a man must do lie in his hand. This old saying is true: “Fate is what we must do; destiny is what we are meant to do.” The Christian does not believe in an inescapable fate, but he does believe in a destiny that he can accept or refuse.

Jesus Christ is looking for something *from* each of us, and there is something He wants done *by* each of us. Is there an area in your life that the Lord wants you to surrender? Is He leading you to give something of worth to someone else? Could He be leading you to spend more time with Him in prayer? Pray about the possibilities, and then make yourself readily available to however He leads.

## **FRIDAY: Living in Assurance**

*“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.”*

—Revelation 3:4, emphasis added

Do you realize that we are to put on and wear Christ as our garment? For Christ said, “*He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments*” (Revelation 3:5a). In Romans 13:14 we are told: “*Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.*” So whenever you get dressed, ask yourself: *Would Jesus approve of what I am wearing?*

Evaluating in this manner should change the way some of us dress. Jesus does not want us to wear anything that would draw attention away from the holiness of God. Yet our culture does that all the time. The more you are conformed to today’s immodest culture, the more you will allow your body to dishonor God. As the beautiful hymn expresses below, every day we are wearing Christ, so we should consciously consider whether our clothing reflects all that He is to us as our righteous and holy Redeemer. As one great reformer wrote in his hymn, “Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness”:

*Jesus, thy blood and righteousness  
My beauty are, my glorious dress;  
‘Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,  
With joy shall I lift up my head.*

*Bold shall I stand in thy great day,  
For who aught to my charge shall lay?  
Fully absolved through these I am—  
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.*

*Lord, I believe were sinners more  
Than sands upon the ocean shore,  
Thou hast for all, a ransom paid,  
For all a full atonement made.*

—Nicolaus L. von Zinzendorf (1700–1760)

Tr. by John Wesley (1703–1791)

## **SATURDAY: Embrace Christ**

***He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.***

—1 John 5:12, emphasis added

Know that Christ holds you: “*He who overcomes . . . I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life*” (Revelation 3:5b). This does not indicate that we can lose our salvation. To have your name kept in the Book of Life means that you are saved. Can you lose your salvation? Scripture clearly says no! In Sardis, the king could blot you out if he did not like you, but not in the kingdom of God. True believers will never have their names blotted out.

A true believer does not practice sin; a counterfeit believer cannot help but practice sin, because he does not have God’s new nature within him. But these words were not written so that you and I might judge other people. The words were inspired so that we may examine ourselves. I exhort you to answer these questions honestly before God:

- Do I have the Holy Spirit within me, or am I merely pretending to be a Christian? In other words, am I merely professing rather than possessing new life in Christ?
- Do I cultivate my walk in the Spirit by daily Bible reading and prayer?
- Has any unconfessed sin defiled my inner person? Am I willing to confess and forsake it?
- Do I allow my old nature to control my thoughts and desires, or does the divine nature rule me? When temptation comes, do I “play with it” or flee from it? Do I immediately yield to the Spirit of God within me?
- Is there life and growth and fruit in my life—or nothing?

Warren Wiersbe once told a great story about a Sunday school teacher who was explaining the Christian’s old and new natures to a class of teenagers:

“Our old nature came from Adam,” he explained, “and our new nature comes from Christ, who is called ‘the Last Adam.’” He had the class read 1 Corinthians 15:45: So also it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living soul.” The Last Adam became a life-giving spirit (NASB). “This means there are two ‘Adams’ living in me,” said one of the teenagers. “That’s right,” the teacher replied. “And



what is the practical value of this truth?" The class was silent for a moment, and then a student spoke up. "This idea of the 'two Adams' really helps me in fighting temptation," he said. "When temptation comes knocking at my door, if I send the first Adam to answer, I'll sin. But if I send the Last Adam, I'll get victory."<sup>1</sup>

The life that is real is honest with God about these vital issues.

**Make a choice to live in hope:** Here is what living in hope is all about: "*I will confess [your] name before My Father and before His angels*" (Revelation 3:5c). If you are a true believer, one day you will "be taken by the hand by the Lord Jesus, to be led up past the marshaled ranks of the angels, up along the golden boulevards of glory, up past the cherubim and the seraphim, up, up, to the Throne of God Himself and . . . hear the Lord Jesus call you by your name and present you in person as His well beloved!"<sup>2</sup> Next, you will hear the Father saying, "Bring the best robe and put it on My child." Picture it: a robe of white, bright as the day, and pure as the light (Romans 13:14).

When the Lord Jesus was transfigured on the mount, something happened not only to His countenance but also to His clothes. His raiment became white as the light. What a reward for faithfulness—to have a robe like that draped around your shoulders and to be invited to walk the shining ways of glory in light-transfigured clothes! Even Solomon in all his glory was never arrayed like one of these!

This week you have seen the way to know Christ more personally. Does He know your name? Are you robed in white? Wake up and be watchful! If you think that perhaps you have only been professing Christ, and not possessing Him, ask Him to convict your heart right now, and, as your holy Advocate, to argue for your righteousness by pleading His blood shed for you. If you have truly prayed in faith, thank Him that now He will be able to confess your name before His Father in heaven. Then, in these closing precious moments, let the Son of God enfold you with His Spirit and His love.

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<sup>1</sup> Drawn from Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> John Phillips, *Exploring Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), electronic edition, in loc.