

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Last weekend my family and I went to Branson, Missouri on vacation to celebrate the 40th wedding anniversary of my wife's parents. With 6 kids, it's a 7 hour drive if you push it. On the way down to Branson, I drove the whole way. For whatever reason, I never really got tired. But on the way back, in the middle of the afternoon, I was getting *very* sleepy! You've all been on long road trips, right? Sooner or later, the fatigue hits. You suddenly hit a wall. Your eyes don't want to stay open. You know how extremely important it is for you to stay awake. You know your life and the life of your whole family is on the line here. And even as that very thought is going through your head, you're snapped awake by the car rolling over those rumble strips that are across the white line. You can't believe you dozed even as you were thinking about how important it was to stay awake. You slap yourself in the face. You pull out some carrots to eat. They only help for a moment. You can't stay awake.

There's only one solution in a situation like this. Don't be a hero. Pull off the road and admit you shouldn't be driving anymore. Let someone else drive. Get some rest. Get your family and yourself out of a very dangerous situation.

Now, we didn't come to church today to talk about how to drive safely. We are here today to talk about a drowsiness that is far more serious with far worse consequences than even falling asleep at the wheel. If we as a church or we as individuals fall asleep spiritually, we are in danger of eternal death.

This was the danger we heard addressed to the church in Sardis from our reading from Revelation 3:1-6. Let's listen to that warning once again:

“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. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. 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. 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. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

How are you feeling this morning? Drowsy or wide awake? (I'm talking spiritually?) Are you alive and kicking or are you on life support? And how about Good Shepherd? Experts have identified 4 stages that many churches go through. The first stage is the **Movement stage**. The church is in the establishment phase. All the member are 100% committed to getting this new church off the ground. All are in church, Bible class and spending time with each other in their homes too. The second stage: The **Magnificence stage**. The church is established. There is a feeling that the goal was achieved. There is still enthusiasm and much is being done to reach the lost. However, the commitment is starting to fade. Not everyone is on board anymore. Some of the initial

intensity has faded. The third stage is the **Monument stage**. People focus on maintaining their past reputation. They do things because they've always been done that way. Commitment continues to drop. And finally there is the **Mausoleum stage**, also known as "the dead church." People have drifted away or died. Attendance levels are low. New people aren't welcomed into the congregation. Instead they are looked at suspiciously... after all they may might take control and change things.

Now here's the thing. Churches don't have to go through all four stages. They can stay at the Movement phase indefinitely. My purpose here is to try to peg where Good Shepherd is at in those four stages. Rather it's food for thought. Finally, each and every one of us needs to look in our heart and be honest about where we are at.

There's a story told about a discouraged preacher who announced to his congregation one Sunday morning that the church was dead and that the next Sunday he would conduct the funeral service for their church. Naturally this caused a commotion in the congregation. Sure enough, the next Sunday, the pastor had a casket in the front of church. The curtains were drawn, the music was somber and quiet. During the sermon, the pastor said, "Some of you may not agree with me that the church is dead. To convince you, I am going to ask you all to come forward one by one and view its remains. Each one came up to the casket and looked inside. But instead of a body, there they found a mirror.

Friends, if falling asleep behind the wheel of a car is dangerous for you and your family, spiritual sleep, spiritual apathy, indifference to the Gospel... is of far greater danger, for the consequences are eternal.

Let's look closer at the text. The church was located in Sardis, which at the time was a very rich city. The residents were used to the easy life. This same spirit seemed to infect the congregation. **"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God."** The congregation was dying. But what's interesting is that apparently this fact was not evident to the casual observer. In other words, this wasn't a church where there was seating for a thousand, and two dozen were present. Neither was this a church where everyone sat on their hands and no one did anything. Apparently they were doing good. They had a reputation for being alive. But the truth was, they were not.

How can this be? Well, the members of the church were perhaps doing good works... but not the kind that God expects of his children. Or maybe they were doing good works, but not with the attitude God wanted to see in their hearts.

This warning is one we each need to take to heart today. Listen carefully: An activist church is not necessarily an alive church. There are churches today that are very much involved in politics. Or very much involved in social justice issues. Or very much involved in helping the poor. Or very much involved in protecting the environment. And even as the church may look very active, and may even have a good reputation in the community for being involved, Christ may say it is dying. How can this be?

Satan distracts the church from its number one priority and it's whole reason for existence. The church is here to lead people to Christ. The church is here to preach the good news about Christ, and at the center of the teaching *always* must be "Christ crucified." The Gospel in Word must predominate in the preaching and teaching. The Gospel in the Sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper must be the central. Any church that doesn't have the cross of Christ front and center (not literally but doctrinally) is a church that is dying... no matter how active the church is in the community!

The reason is this: man looks at the outward appearance, namely, the good the church is doing. But God looks at the heart. *Why* is the church doing what it is doing? And he says the same

about you and me as individuals. God doesn't only see the outward acts you do to help others. God looks at your heart. Why are you doing it? Is it to look good before others? Are you doing it because other expect it? Are you doing it because someone is making you? Are you doing it because everyone is doing it? God looks at the heart. He's looking for works that are done purely out of thanks and praise to Jesus for the holiness he gave us as a gift when he lived and died for us. "God, this is for you because of the eternal life you give me in spite of who I am!" *That's* the motivation God loves.

Where good works are lacking in the church, believers are falling asleep... they are dying spiritually. Where there are good works they're the wrong kind or done with the wrong reason, believers are falling asleep... they are dying spiritually.

Friends, be honest. Are you awake or asleep? Are you alive or dead? Our Lord Jesus confronts you and me today and forces us to own up. Those words to the church in Sardis apply to us too, don't they?

And so Jesus says to us: "**Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.**" What's the solution to spiritual indifference? Sleepiness? Laziness? What's the solution wrongly focused hearts and misguided churches? (1) *Remember*. It's that simple. Remember what you have received and heard. Remember when you heard the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ, and your heart burned within you? Remember hearing about God's love that moved Jesus to come to our planet, live among us in this sinful world, keep perfectly obedient to the Father, then willingly give it all up on a wooden cross? Remember how he died there for all of our sin and guilt? Remember his glorious resurrection? Remember the eternal life that is ours because he died and rose again? These are the essential truths of our faith! Satan wants us to forget! He wants to side track us onto other things. Earthly things. Don't let him. Remember. Every day, take time to remember what you have received and heard.

(2) But don't just remember it. Obey it. The thought in the original Greek is "keep" it. Hold on to it. Don't let it go. Keep it in your heart so you live it in your life. When you do so, you will (3) repent. To repent means to change the way you think and act. It's actually the Holy Spirit that changes the way we think and act through the Gospel. By remembering who we are and remembering who Christ is and what he did, we, with the Spirit's power, turn from the sleepiness and the path of death. We are wide awake on the path of life.

Jesus makes it clear that the time for this is now. Countless people live with nagging consciences. They know they're not right with God. They know they are on a path that isn't good or right. They know they should be in church. They know God and his Word must be the highest priority. But they think, "Later. I'll get to it. Some day. One day. When things slow down. When it's more convenient. When summer comes. After Christmas. Once Easter rolls around." Jesus tells us this matter is urgent! "**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.**" Friends, time is short. Death can come at any time. Jesus can return at any time. The time to repent is now. The time to wake up is now.

Jesus concludes this letter to the church in Sardis by reminding them of the reward that waits those who love and trust Jesus until the end. "**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. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.**" Scripture often speaks of righteousness in terms of clothing. Isaiah 64:6 "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags." Isaiah 61:10 "I delight greatly in the LORD; my

soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” Galatians 3:26-27 “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” And in this same book of Revelation, 7:14 we read about those in white robes: **“These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”**

Clothed in the righteousness of Christ, we are worthy to walk with God. And he promises that our name will never be blotted out of his book of life. Jesus promises he will acknowledge our name before the Father in heaven. Eternal life will be ours.

Dear friends: the problem is losing our spiritual focus... taking our eyes off the cross of Christ. We become spiritually sleepy and indifferent. This is how Satan kills our church and our souls. The solution is go back to the basics. Remember what you learned from the very beginning. Remember your own disobedience. Remember Jesus, his life, his death and resurrection. Remember and repent. Wake up! These are spiritual rumble strips that keep us from drifting in to the ditch and eternal destruction.

Do you see a fellow believer falling asleep at the wheel? Wake him up! Who is not in church today? Would you take a minute to look around and notice? Could you give them a call this week? Could you go visit them?

As we remember Christ and his cross together and work together under the cross of Christ and help one another to stay awake and spur one another on toward genuine love and good deeds, we will not be a Mausoleum church. We will a Movement church. A church on the move to take the Gospel of Jesus to our community and to the world. May God move our hearts and fill us with excitement for that goal. Amen.