

(The Lord and His Church) 8. the Hypocritical Church

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen's sermon addresses the dangers of hypocrisy within the church, emphasizing the need for spiritual awakening and genuine repentance to align with God's standards.

Scripture: Luke 21:34

Topics: "Spiritual Discernment", "Hypocrisy"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches on the Lord's opinion versus man's opinion, highlighting the importance of spiritual discernment and the danger of seeking approval from men rather than God. He emphasizes the need for repentance, spiritual alertness, and the pursuit of perfection in works done for God's glory alone. Poonen warns against hypocrisy, spiritual slumber, and the deception of relying on outward displays of spirituality. He encourages believers to be part of the faithful remnant, to keep their garments clean, and to strive to be overcomers who will receive the promised rewards.

Transcript

"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars says this: 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, and you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white; for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and 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 Lord's Opinion and Man's

The Lord refers to Himself here as the One who has the seven Spirits of God, or the sevenfold Holy Spirit. We saw the meaning of this in Chapter One. He also has the seven stars. He expects each star (messenger) in His hand to be a Spirit-filled representative of His in the church.

The messenger in Sardis was one who had built up a tremendous reputation before others as a spiritual man. But the Lord's opinion of him was the exact opposite of that of his fellow-believers in Sardis. This shows how carnal and gullible most believers in Sardis were.

More than 90% of believers are unable to recognise the difference between a carnal messenger and a spiritual one. And more than 99% of believers are unable to distinguish between soul-power and spiritual power.

Most believers are impressed by the display and exercise of spiritual gifts and that is how they evaluate a preacher or an elder. And that is how they are deceived. God however looks at the heart. The messenger at Sardis may have had the gifts of the Spirit. But he was spiritually dead.

This is a warning for all of us to take heed to: That the opinion that 99% of our fellow-believers have about us can be 100% wrong! God's opinion about us could be the exact opposite of their opinion.

The same applies to a church. Others may consider a church to be "spiritually alive". But God may know it to be spiritually dead. And vice-versa. Churches that God considers spiritually alive could be considered dead by undiscerning men.

Most believers evaluate a church by the warmth of the welcome they receive when they come to the meetings, the size of the congregation, the amount of noise and emotion in the meetings, the musical quality of the singing, the intellectual content of the sermon and the amount of the offering!! But God isn't impressed by any of these things.

God evaluates a church by the Christ-like humility, purity and love and the freedom from self-centredness that He finds in the hearts of its members. God's evaluation and man's evaluation of a church can therefore be at total variance with each other. In fact, they usually are.

There were no Jezebels in Sardis and no teachings of Balaam or of the Nicolaitans either. But they had something worse - hypocrisy.

The messenger at Sardis must have felt a secret satisfaction in the reputation that he had built up for himself. Otherwise he would not have ended up as a hypocrite. There is nothing wrong in being known by others as one who is spiritually alive, provided we don't get any satisfaction out of their opinion of us.

But if we are seeking a name for ourselves in what we do for the Lord, then we will certainly end up living before the face of men and not before the face of God. Then we would have to admit that we haven't realised that man's opinion is worthless.

Christendom is full of preachers who are constantly doing things and writing reports in order to get a name for themselves. All of these will end up like the messenger in Sardis. And they will be judged by the Lord in the final day, because their works were not perfect before God. It is impossible for our works to be perfect before God if our motive is to impress men.

The messenger at Sardis was also fast asleep spiritually.

Jesus warned His disciples of the great need of being alert and praying, in order to be ready for His coming - for worldly cares and the love of mammon have a way of putting the best of believers to sleep (See Luke 21:34-36).

When a man is asleep, he is unaware of things happening in the real world around him. He is more conscious of the unreal world of his dreams. This is how it is with those who are spiritually asleep too. They are unaware of the real world of the kingdom of God, of lost souls around them and of eternal realities. They are alive however to the unreal, temporary world of material riches, pleasure, comfort, earthly honour and fame.

That was how it was with the messenger of the church in Sardis.

The Lord exhorts him to wake up - in other words to give up the unreal world of his dreams (the world of materialism) - and to strengthen the few things in his life that were sinking towards spiritual death, but which had not yet died (verse 2). The embers had not died out completely. But he had to "fan them to a flame" soon, or they would die out completely (2 Timothy 1:6 - AMP).

Perfect Works in God's Sight

The Lord tells him that his works were not perfect in God's sight (verse 2 - KJV). Many believers are afraid of the word "perfection". But here we see that the Lord expected this messenger's works to be perfect before God.

Spiritual perfection is a vast subject. But what it means here is that this elder's works were not done with singleness of heart to secure God's approval alone.

His works were good works - that's how he got a name that he was spiritually alive. But they were not done for the glory of God. They were done to impress men. And so they were all dead works. There was "iniquity in his holy activities" (Exodus 28:38). He had to cleanse himself from this filthiness of spirit, before God could approve of him (2 Corinthians 7:1).

Good works done to obtain the honour of men are dead works.

The first step to perfection is to do everything before the face of God. If we don't begin here, we won't get anywhere. Whether it is praying or fasting or helping others or whatever, the important question that we need to ask ourselves is: "Am I thinking now of some man seeing me do this and appreciating me, or am I doing this before God's face for His glory alone?" A wrong motive is what corrupts many good deeds and makes them imperfect in God's eyes.

The Lord reminds the messenger to remember what he has received and heard through the years and to obey those exhortations (verse 3). The Lord expects more from those to whom more is given. This messenger had heard much about perfection and about the necessity of doing everything for the glory of God. But he had not taken those exhortations seriously. To know the truth and not to obey it is to build one's house on sand. One day it will collapse. And that was what happened to the messenger and the church at Sardis.

The Call to Repentance

The messenger is now exhorted to repent (verse 3). This is the message of the Lord to all churches in these last days: REPENT.

There was still hope for this messenger, for he was still a star in the Lord's hand (verse 1). The Lord had not given up on him. But he had to wake up first and repent.

John the Baptist was the forerunner of Christ who prepared the nation of Israel for the Lord's first coming by preaching repentance. Now the prophets in the church have to prepare God's people for the second coming of Christ by preaching repentance to them. The message of repentance is the greatest need in the church today.

If the messenger does not wake up and repent, the Lord says that He will come upon him in judgment, as unexpectedly as a thief comes at night. The Lord comes as a thief in the night primarily for unbelievers - but also for believers who walk in darkness. The sons of the day who are walking in the light will not be surprised by the coming of the Lord, but the sons of the night will (1 Thessalonians 5:4, 5).

The overcomers will always be ready for the coming of the Lord because they are always walking in the light. Those who are walking in darkness, however, with unconfessed sin in their lives will not be ready, even if they call themselves "believers".

Revelation 3:3 indicates clearly that those believers (even if they are messengers in a church) who are spiritually asleep and who do not repent will be surprised by the Lord when He comes. They will be in the same category as the sons of darkness. These are the foolish virgins who will be left outside the closed door, when the Lord comes (Matthew 25:10-13).

The Lord says,

"Behold I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his garments, lest he walk about naked and men see his shame." (Revelation 16:15).

The Faithful Remnant

There were however a few people in Sardis who had not soiled their garments (verse 4). This was the only redeeming feature of this church.

God has a list of names of those who have kept their hearts pure. This purity refers not only to freedom from the sins of the flesh, but also to freedom from the sin of seeking the honour of men and other sins of the spirit.

This was the remnant of the overcomers who lived before God's face in Sardis. As the Lord Himself pointed out, these overcomers were FEW. This remnant has always been small in every generation, for there are few who find the narrow gate and the narrow way that lead to life (Matthew 7:14).

The Lord says that these few are worthy and that therefore they will walk with Him in white (verse 4). These are the ones who had obeyed the Lord's exhortation in

Luke 21:36 (AMP): "Keep awake then and be attentive at all times, praying that you may have the full strength and be accounted worthy to escape all these things and to stand in the presence of the Son of man."

They were accounted worthy. And so they will walk in the white garments of the bride on the wedding-day of the Lamb.

All overcomers are then promised the reward of being clothed in white garments (verse 5). This indicates clearly that only overcomers will form the bride of Christ.

Overcomers are also promised that their names will not be erased from the Lamb's book of life (verse 5). This makes it clear that a person's name can be in the book of life and then be erased from it. The promise given to the overcomer here would be meaningless, if such a danger does not even exist. The plain teaching of Scripture is that believers who live after the flesh WILL DIE SPIRITUALLY (Romans 8:13). They will lose the salvation that they once had.

The Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of my book" (Exodus 32:33).

In Psalm 69:25 we read of a prophecy concerning Judas Iscariot that is quoted by Peter in Acts 1:20. On reading further in Psalm 69, we see a prophetic reference there to Judas Iscariot's name being blotted out of the book of life (verse 28). His name was once in that book and then it was erased.

One has to be an overcomer to retain one's name there.

The Lord also promises to confess the overcomer's name before the Father and before His angels. This is a reward promised to those who unashamedly confess His Name before men (Matthew 10:32; Luke 12:8). The Lord places great value on our publicly confessing His name before our relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues at work. Many believers are unfaithful here. And thereby they prove that they are not overcomers.

What an honour it will be for our name to be publicly confessed by the Lord in that final day. Even if we have to bear shame and persecution for the Lord's sake, every day for a hundred years on earth, it will still be worth it all, if the final reward is that the Lord proudly acknowledges us before the Father and His holy angels one day. One word of approval from His precious lips will erase from our minds the memories of a lifetime of suffering and ridicule.

Those who have ears to hear will take heed to what the Spirit is saying (verse 6).

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