

I. Introduction

- A. *“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.” (Revelation 3:1–2)*

II. THE CHURCH OF THE LIVING DEAD

- A. I would like to think with you today about the subject: **The Church of the Living Dead**
- B. Welcome to part ten of our summer series, **“What’s the Difference?”**
- C. Over this summer, we are looking different religions, competing worldviews, and alternative versions of Christianity, asking one defining question: What’s the difference? What actually separates them from us?
- D. The longer at look at this stuff, the more I am convinced of one great truth:
1. **Historic, biblical Christianity does the absolute best job of accounting for everything Scripture reveals and the human heart knows about our origin, our broken world, redemption, wholeness, our deepest purpose, hope, and our eternal destiny.**
 2. Nothing else even comes close. I say this with love. I say this with respect.
- E. I’m going to say something that sounds harsh, but I’ll just put it out there.
1. You could say that this series is exploring why our biblical viewpoint is right and why other viewpoints are wrong.
 2. I have the spirit of Jesus when I say this, because Jesus drew those lines without apology.
 3. For Jesus, some ideas are true, and some are dangerously false. So He kept calling His friends from error to truth and from darkness to light.
 4. But the one thing we have to stay away from is pride. Arrogance.
- F. So yes, I think the evangelical system of theology best explains the revelation of the word of God, and is the best way, by far of honoring all the biblical data, and bringing a person to mental health, emotional health, and true spiritual power. But...
- G. But if being right makes us proud, then something has already gone terribly wrong.
1. Grace does not produce people who stand over others saying, “Look how much better we are.”
 2. **Grace produces people who fall on their faces saying, “How in the world did the Father run to embrace me, the chief of sinners?”**
 - a) AND... the follow up to that... “So now, I want everybody I love to find the treasure I found when I found Jesus.”
- H. And that is why I’m putting this talk here in the middle of this series. Before we continue to look at everybody else’s errors, Jesus puts His hand on our wrist and checks for a pulse... is there a heart that beats with love for lost people?

- I. So let’s go to Sardis.

III. The City on the Cliff

- A. Before Sardis was a church, it was an empire. It was the capital of ancient Lydia, the legendary home of King Croesus, a man whose wealth was so vast that his name became a historical proverb.
- B. The city was built on a series of sheer, vertical cliffs rising hundreds of feet above the valley floor.
- C. Sardis was a citadel in the clouds, an impregnable fortress that looked down on the rest of the world with absolute, unbothered contempt.
- D. The citizens of Sardis believed they were safe because they had a reputation for being invincible. But that very reputation became their cemetery.
- E. In 549 BC, Cyrus the Great of Persia marched to the base of those cliffs. He could not attack them, so he waited, planning to starve the city out.
- F. But one day, one of his soldiers, watching from the rocks below, saw a Lydian soldier accidentally drop his helmet over the fortress wall. The soldier quietly climbed down a hidden, narrow crevice in the cliffside to retrieve it, thinking nobody was watching.
- G. He reported the incident and Cyrus knew there was a way up and in.
- H. That night, Cyrus sent a small, detachment of men up that exact crevice. When they reached the top, they found the walls completely unguarded. The watchmen were asleep. Why guard a wall that everyone knows cannot be reached?
- I. Sardis fell in a single night without a fight. The Bible says:
1. *“Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” (1 Corinthians 10:12)*
- J. Three hundred years later, Sardis grew strong, wealthy, and overconfident again. A Greek general captured it the same way. The city fell twice because its people trusted their reputation and lost their mission of guarding the gates.
- K. And then, two hundred years later, a church stood there—Christian believers, just like us in Redding.
- L. Jesus tells them, “I know your works.”
1. I can see what you do. I can see your church calendar. I can hear your worship songs. I can see your good works in the community.
 - a) You are very busy, very active, and very impressive looking.
- M. You have a name that you are alive... then Jesus delivers a devastating diagnosis: “But you are dead.”
- N. It’s the Church of the Living Dead.
- O. We are living in a moment where people feel chronically unrooted, unseen, and overwhelmed.
1. Especially if you are younger...
 - a) You have been told to build a meaningful, successful, stable life without the scaffolding previous generations took for granted.
 - b) Families are fractured, communities are thin, the economic ground is shifting, and the old pathways of adulthood have crumbled.
 - c) You are handed towering possibilities but no foundation for it.
 - d) You are told to invent yourself, curate your brand, prove your value, and secure your significance.

2. So, you do your best. You build your own modern citadel.
 - a) You construct a cliff of reputation, career metrics, looks-maxing, and digital curation. You make sure your public name says that you are alive, thriving, and in control.
3. But under the vertical cliffs of your external success, in the quiet hours of the night when the screen is glowing six inches from your face, you are exhausted. The living dead.
4. Jesus knows.

IV. NSGC

- A. I started as a pastor at a historic church in Chicago called North Side Gospel Center. It was legendary.
- B. It was the birthplace of Awana, the international children's ministry that has reached millions of kids across the globe.
- C. The founder of Awana was retired, but still there when I arrived.
- D. He mentored me. He encouraged me. He taught me grace.
- E. In its glory days, North Side Gospel Center was an evangelistic powerhouse. It was radical, cutting-edge, and wildly imaginative. They used contemporary music (Honky Tonk and Ragtime) when no one else would, they ran massive social ministries, and they poured their lives out for the bringing of salvation to the city around them.
- F. But by the time I walked through those doors, the glory days were a distant memory.
- G. The church had fossilized around its past. It had become a shrine to its own history.
- H. They preserved the old songs, structures, and cultural norms. Walking into the church was like walking into a time machine.
- I. Meanwhile, the neighborhood outside their art deco build had changed dramatically.
 1. The kids walking past the church steps were wearing Metallica and Black Sabbath T-shirts, speaking different languages, and carrying different hurts.
 2. The world had moved, but the church had become a museum of yesterday's grace.
- J. When I was in graduate school, I wrote a paper about that church. I called it Lost Radicalism. That was the quiet tragedy of the Center.
- K. They did not start that way. They started with fire. They started with hearts on fire, a radical passion lost people.
- L. But over decades of success, the gaze of the church shifted inward.
 1. They became focused with preserving what they had, maintaining their facility, and serving the preferences of the people who were already inside.
 2. The evangelistic pulse grew weaker, and eventually, that life left the building.
 3. Today, North Side Gospel Center is gone. The building was given away.
 4. That is the story of thousands of churches that have come and gone because they thought about evangelism the way Sardis thought about its walls: they took it for granted.
- M. Any church, any college, any Christian institution can go that way.

V. Pathway Church

- A. I need to pause right here and say something incredibly joyful about Pathway. God is doing something undeniably real in this house.
 1. This past year alone, 1,104 people trusted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior through the ministry of this church.
 2. Next weekend, 32 more people are going down into the waters of baptism to declare their union with Christ.
 3. That is not superficial church activity; that is resurrection. That is a pulse... strong, steady, healthy.
 - a) All the glory goes to God.
 4. Our evangelism, ministries, theology, love, and church are healthy. And that is exactly when the temptation comes to let down our guard.
 - a) **This message is a battle cry to cherish, protect, and defend the evangelistic pulse God has given us right now, and to refuse to ever let today's fruit become tomorrow's fossil.**
 5. I will not pastor a church that spends one minute glorifying the memory of what God did yesterday.
 6. I have zero interest in running a museum for yesterday's grace.

VI. SOUL-WINNING

- A. Our grandparents generation of Christians used a phrase that's gone out of style. It's the phrase: "soul-winning."
- B. Perhaps the phrase went out of fashion because Jesus taught us to care about the whole person. That's true.
- C. But a soul is not a detachable spiritual fragment. A soul is a whole person before God—with a mind, will, emotions, body, story, future, and eternal destiny. You are an eternal soul... and every soul needs Jesus.
- D. So when our grandparents spoke about winning souls, they meant seeing real people rescued from sin, brought to faith in Jesus Christ, and transformed by grace in every dimension of life.
 1. *"The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise."* (Proverbs 11:30)
 2. *"For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"* (Matthew 16:26)
- E. If a soul has no eternal value, evangelism is optional.
- F. But if a soul matters forever to God, then salvation can never become a side issue for the church.
- G. Jesus gave His church many missions. But there is only 1 Great Commission:
 1. *"And He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.'"* (Mark 16:15)
- H. That commission begins with the Gospel: Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again. It calls people to believe in Him for eternal life.
- I. The church exists to proclaim that Gospel and see lost people saved.
- J. Everything else matters... BUT... **Nothing else comes first.**

VII. CRUISE SHIP OR BATTLESHIP?

- A. So what kind of church do you want us to build?**
- B. A cruise ship or a battleship?
- C. A cruise ship is organized around the experience of the passengers. Comfort. Entertainment. Good food. Smooth sailing. A satisfying journey for the people already aboard.
 1. A battleship is organized around the mission. Everyone aboard is crew. Training matters. Readiness matters. The vessel exists for something beyond the comfort of the people already on board.
- D. To be clear, people outside the church are not the enemy. Other churches are not the enemy. Democrats are not the enemy. Republicans are not the enemy. I am not talking about politics, hostility, or religious arrogance.
 1. The enemy is the devil and his world system that keeps precious souls trapped in confusion and pain. *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.”* (1 Peter 5:8)
- E. A cruise ship asks, “Are the passengers happy?”
A battleship asks, “Are we accomplishing the mission?”
- F. A cruise ship says, “We don’t want to get too big.”
A mission church declares, “There’s always room for more?”
- G. A cruise ship says, “We all love each other.”
A mission church aches, “Do we have enough love for people not yet here?”
- H. A cruise ship says, “The worship was awesome.”
A mission church asks, “Did worship awaken me to the magnificence of the gospel and the need of the lost?”
- I. A cruise ship says, “It’s a great time when we get together.”
A mission church asks, “What happens after the gathering ends?”
- J. The church is not alive merely because church things are happening.
 1. *“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”* (Luke 19:10)
 2. *“...As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”* (John 20:21)
- K. That is His mission statement. And when His Spirit flows through us, it becomes ours too.
- L. The church is alive when the grace of Christ does not merely flow to us, but through us—out of the harbor, toward the horizon, toward lost people who still need to be saved.

VIII. WHAT IS THIS HARBOR FOR?

- A. Most of you know about the Harbor and the Horizon. Pathway is in a twenty-four-month initiative to prepare another mission-minded generation for an even bigger expansion for the Gospel.
- B. Part of that includes the dream of freeing this facility from its \$2.6 million mortgage. About 200 families have already promised \$1.6 million toward that debt, and I am deeply grateful.
- C. I’m praying to bring that up to 700 families, so please consider this your invitation.
- D. But let me say this clearly: a paid-off building has never saved a human soul. Jesus does not need to be rescued by a capital campaign. Your standing before God rests on Jesus Christ, His Cross, and His finished work—not on a card, a pledge, or a gift.
- E. So what is the Harbor and the Horizon for?**
- F. It is a launchpad for maximum evangelism for generations to come—for your children, your grandchildren, and people who are not yet in this room.
- G. My prayer is maximum participation, regardless of the size of your gift: every family asking, “Lord, what is my part?”
- H. No shame. No pressure. Just an opportunity to align your heart, your mission, and your treasure with the Gospel.
- I. We are not building barns for ourselves. We are preparing a launchpad for the glory of God and the saving of souls.**
- J. But you say, Bill, that’s great for all you speakers and preachers... but I’m just a student, I don’t know the answers, I’m totally new to this whole Jesus thing. I don’t know anything.

IX. MANY ROLES. ONE MISSION.

- A. I have good news. God’s Gospel Power does not move through only one kind of Christian.**
 1. Some Christians are
 - a) **EXPLAINERS.** They preach, teach, clarify, and help people understand the Gospel. Paul did that. Jesus did that.
 - b) **BRINGERS.** The woman at the well brought her whole town to Jesus. Andrew brought Peter. You may not know exactly what to say, but you can invite someone, introduce someone, or bring someone to hear the gospel.
 - c) **PRAYER TEAM.** Paul prayed that Israel would be saved and Ephaphras prayed for the Philippians.
 - d) **GIVERS.** Phoebe funded the church. Joanna and Susanna funded Jesus and His ministry. Lydia opened her purse and her home to the mission of the Gospel.
 - e) **HOSTS.** Maybe you don’t want to speak or teach, but you love hospitality like Lydia and Gaius who hosted small groups in their homes.
- B. It’s all the same thing: position your life so the gospel message flows through you toward people who need to be saved.
- C. If you love Jesus, then I can safely say, you be you, and God will be God, and the love of Jesus will shine through you.

X. THE OLD, OLD STORY

- A. The truth is God uses people who still struggle. People who get tired, lose their temper, lose their courage, lose their way, and then find their way back to the grace of God.
 1. **He sends people with scars.** People with questions. People with complicated stories. People who know what it is to fail—and who know even more deeply what it is to be forgiven.
- B. That is the army of Jesus.
 1. Not the self-righteous marching around displaying their moral superiority.

2. Not the religious elite congratulating themselves on how much better their doctrine is.
- C. The church of Jesus is made up of rescued sinners who have found a Savior strong enough to save them to the uttermost.
 1. We are imperfect people telling the old, old story of Jesus and His love.
- D. The story has not changed.
 1. Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. He was buried. He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. And everyone who believes in Him has everlasting life.
- E. That is still the story. It always will be.
 1. It is the story we tell when a teenager walks through these doors carrying shame nobody else can see.
 2. It is the story we tell when a young adult is exhausted from trying to invent a life without God.
 3. It is the story we tell when a marriage is hanging by a thread.
 4. It is the story we tell when a grieving person cannot imagine making it through another morning.
 5. It is the story we tell when a successful person discovers that achievement cannot heal the painful scars in the soul.
 6. It is the story we tell when the thinking person trembles at what comes after death.
- F. **We have what the world is looking for.**
 1. Higher than the nations, above the rise and fall of empires...
 2. And far above the headlines and the algorithms and the anxieties of this present age.
- G. God is still on his throne.
 1. And around that throne there is glory.
 - a) There is the sound of heaven declaring that the Father is worthy, the Son is worthy, and the Spirit is worthy.
 - b) There is love.
 2. And from that throne flows the grace that saved you.
 - a) That grace does not trickle down from a reluctant God.
 - b) Grace gushes from the throne of the Father who loved you before you ever knew His name.
 - c) Grace flows through Calvary Love, the finished work of Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain and who now stands alive forevermore.
- H. And heaven is watching what happens when that grace moves through ordinary people.
 1. Every time you invite someone to church, heaven sees it.
 2. Every time you tell someone what Jesus has done for you, heaven hears it.
 3. Every time you pray for a lost friend by name, heaven receives it.
 4. Every time you welcome the outsider, serve without applause, give without being noticed, or choose courage over comfort, heaven knows.
- I. **The Bible says there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. (Luke 15:10)**
- J. One.
 1. Not only thousands. Not only crowds. Not only the moments that make the highlight reel. Just One.
 2. One person matters to God forever. And if one person matters to God, one person must matter to us.
 3. So we will keep on telling the Gospel; it's the only sign of life that matters.
 4. We will tell it when the culture applauds us, and when the culture misunderstands us.
 5. We will tell it when the church feels strong, and when we feel weak.
 6. We will tell it in seasons of growth and in seasons of waiting.
 7. We will tell it to our children and our neighbors, to the wounded and the wealthy, to the skeptic and the seeker.
- K. We will tell it until the last soul has heard the invitation.
- L. We will tell it until the last wandering heart finds home.
 1. We will tell it until the trumpet sounds.
 2. Until the sky splits open and the King returns.
- M. And when Jesus comes back, He will not be searching for a church with the most impressive reputation.
 1. **Jesus will be looking for a church that stayed alive to the plight of the lost and the power of the gospel.**
 2. A church that never lost its love for people who were not yet in the room.
- XI. Let It Be Us.
 - A. May Pathway never become a museum of yesterday's grace.
 - B. And when we stand before that throne, nobody will boast about how impressive we were.
 1. Nobody will say, "Look what we accomplished." No.
 - C. We will look at the Lamb.
 1. We will fall before Jesus.
 - a) We will sing about His blood, His mercy, His resurrection, and His matchless grace.
 - D. And maybe, by the grace of God, someone will be there because you took one step of faith.
 1. You prayed. You served. You gave. You told the old, old story.
 - E. The world is waiting. Heaven is watching. Jesus is worthy.
 - F. And until He returns, we will keep telling the story:
 1. Jesus saves. Jesus saves.
Bear the news to every land,
Climb the steeps and cross the waves;
Onward! 'Tis our Lord's command!
Jesus Saves! Jesus Saves.