

## I. Intro:

A. A dozen times over the last fifteen years, I have gotten together with two good friends and we have done something we call 2 + 1. We work on this in advance, and then, when we are together, we set aside a few hours to share our thoughts and observations about the other guys with them.

B. 2 + 1 means we are going to offer two affirmations and one challenge.

C. It works like this: Someone is selected first – guy A. At that point, guy B says, “I think you are doing this really well.” Or, “I want to affirm you in this.” Or, “I have really been impressed by...” They open with an affirmation. And then person B pivots to the challenge. So, they say, “I am going to suggest that you work on X.” Or, “I am not sure you are aware of Y. I think it’s something you need to work on.” And then he offers another affirmation. 2 + 1.

D. And then guy C does the same thing for Guy A. And then – after both guys have weighed in, guy A responds, and we talk about it. It usually takes 30 minutes to an hour for this to happen.

E. And then guy B is on the hot seat. And both Guys A and C weight in. As you can imagine:

1. We take breaks, because this can be pretty intense.
2. Though we start and end with a positive – and they are important – the focus tends to be on the challenge.
3. These are not conversations you can have with just anyone. They require a lot of trust. They require real friendships.
4. But they are invaluable. Mostly. Perhaps not always. There may be a guy who keeps hearing the same challenge area every year. It involves the way he is always checking his phone when you are talking with him. And, perhaps., hypothetically, after hearing the same challenge from both guys – who arrived at it independently – he may accuse of sounding “just like his wife,” who apparently has mentioned the same thing. Hearing the bad news and responding to it are two different things.
5. But it has been a rich practice that I commend you to consider. We are often blind to our blind spots. The odds are pretty high that your friends can see things about you that you cannot see yourself.

F. I share it here because, for the most part, while Jesus has not been doing a 2 + 1 with the churches in Asia Minor, he has been doing a 1+1.

1. These letters have followed a format: 1) they are addressed to the messenger for a certain city; 2) Jesus identifies himself in some way that links back to the Old Testament, links back to Revelation 1 and that has meaning for the specific church; 3) he then shares something they are doing right; then 4) he shares something they are doing wrong; 5) there is a warning; and then there is a promise.
2. So, while Jesus has not exactly been doing a 2 + 1, he has been doing something like it. But today it’s not a 2 + 1. Not to the church in Sardis. All they get is a 1. Or, a 0 + 1. He has nothing good to say to the people living in this

ancient city. Indeed, he refers to them as being among the living dead – which has led more than a few pastors to work the term Zombies into their sermon.

## II. By way of overview:

A. Sardis was a very old and important Greek city. If you ever go on a tour of 7 Churches, it will stand out because the initial settlement – which was established in 1,200 BC – was on the top of this mountain, 1,500 feet up, with cliffs on three sides, – PIC #1. Which meant it was quite secure. No one wants to try to attack going up a steep hill.

1. Now, it was not perfectly secure – and that factors into the text. On two occasions over the previous 1,200 years, the city had fallen because they thought they were secure and dropped their guard.

2. The first was in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. After Croesus, the king of Sardis, had led a failed raid on Cyrus, King of Persia, the residents of Sardis were chased back to their mountain stronghold. At that point, Cyrus offered lots of money to any soldier who could figure out a way to get into the city. And one of his men saw a sentry from Sardis lean over the wall, lose his helmet and then emerge out of some secret passage down below. That night he went to the spot this guy had emerged from and found this secret passageway. The next night he was able to lead the army there and they got into the unguarded city and took it over with very little fight.

3. This had happened a second time in 218 BC and they were defeated. Then, in 17 AD there was an earthquake that destroyed the city. And when they rebuilt, they did it down below.

4. But Jesus suggests this lack of vigilance, this habit of living off of the past, is what characterizes them spiritually.

B. Here is a picture (PICTURE TWO) of their gym and bath. It makes LA Fitness look a bit shabby.

C. Here is a picture (PICTURE THREE) of what remained of one of the temples to Caesar. Right next to it is a small church. On our tour two years ago, the 20 of us that went, went into this church, prayed and sang the doxology. It was a special moment.

III. What you are going to hear in our text today is that just the people of Sardis had tried to get by on their past (their reputation) – who had grown lax, the Christians were doing the same. They also had dropped their guard, lost their passion. And Jesus is not happy. And so, the harshest things he will say to any of the churches are said to the Christians in Sardis.

A. What we actually see is Jesus acting like an Old Testament prophet who is bringing a lawsuit against the Christians in Sardis.

B. As you may remember, one of the ways we can talk about our relationship with God is via the covenants he sets up. These are contracts between people who love and trust each other.

1. I have noted before that there are a series of covenants in the Bible. We find them with Adam (whose name is a bit like Washington. It refers to the first leader and to our representative). In the Old Testament God sets up covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and then we hear a description of a new covenant (Jeremiah 31) with will be through Jesus.

2. I have also noted that these covenants – while they are a lot like a legal contract – are different. The covenant most of us are familiar with is marriage. And I keep saying, when I officiate at a wedding, I make it a point – it’s sort of a laugh line but serious as well – I say, “No decent lawyer would let their client sign the agreement you are about to make. For better and worse? For sickness and health? Lawyers try to limit risk, not expand it.”

3. Of course, this is changing today because there are now pre-nuptial agreements. We are seeing contract thinking overrun covenant thinking.

C. But we do not get a contract with God. We get a covenant. And what we see in Rev 3 – in Jesus’s comments to the Christians in Sardis – can be viewed as Jesus filing a covenant lawsuit against the people. They are lax in their faith. They are not all in.

1. It’s hard to know exactly what they are doing wrong. But from God’s view, they are not keeping their covenant obligations. And Jesus is saying, “you have to do this.”

D. Jesus doesn’t do pre-nups. He doesn’t do half-way or part time. He only does complete commitment, even sacrificial commitment. And the Christians in Sardis are not keeping their side of the deal. And so, there is a sense in which Jesus is saying, “you need to honor the deal.”

IV. Rev. 3:1-6: **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 works.** This is boiler plate stuff. First a note about where the letter goes – in this case Sardis. Then a description of Jesus. In this case, as judge.

A. The numbers here need to be understood as having value other than their numeric value. Seven is the number of perfection. This is why 666 is so bad.

B. This sounds just like the letter to the church in Ephesus. **These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works, your hard work and your perseverance.** Only, what is written to the church in Ephesus goes on to affirm them and challenge them. As noted, there is no affirmation for those living in Sardis – no “hard work and perseverance.”

C. The image that is used here to describe them is as lamp stands or candle holders. We are not the lamp or the candle - but we are to hold it up. When you look at a church you should see that Jesus is beautiful.

V. Instead: **I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.**

A. My first thought is “Ouch. This had to hurt.” To be called dead is bad. It’s a failing grade.

1. Now, since he is talking to them, it does not seem as though they are dead dead. Some will hold that the people he is talking to at Sardis are Non-Christians – i.e., people not spiritually alive. I don’t think so based on some of what he says next. I think this warning is to those who have accepted Christ. It is just making us of hyperbole, which was common in that culture.

B. My second thought is, “Wait, this is scary for us. He says, “you have a reputation for being alive, but are dead.” This suggests that from the outside looking in, all was well. They likely had a nice building, good web site, some thoughtful programs in the community.

VI. Now we see five command: **V2: 1) Wake up! 2) Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.** Jesus doesn’t call them out on anything in particular – he doesn’t talk about the Nicolaitans or Jezebel or a synagogue of Satan like in other letters. There is no indication of false teaching.

A. But there was no sign of persecution. There are some signs from archeology that suggest they allowed their faith to be corrupted – we find pagan symbols in buildings that shouldn’t have them.

1. For what it’s worth, the ruins of Sardis have the remains of the largest synagogue ever found outside of Palestine. And the Synagogue are full of Roman images – like an eagle – of reliefs of other gods and also of Greek (not Hebrew) words. These should not be in a Jewish synagogue and they suggest a lot of syncretism.

2. The fact that there was such a large Jewish population there – but no mention that the Christians are suffering persecution from the Jews (or the Romans for that matter) leads archeologists to suspect there was a lot of going alone to get along. They had the peace of being inoffensive.

B. As I noted, it’s hard to know exactly what they are doing wrong – other than they have lost their zeal. But what they receive from Jesus is more than a minor slap on the wrist. It is harsh.

**VII. V3: 3) Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard.** One of the reasons it seems that this is directed to Christians, is it suggest they have received the Gospel, and forgiveness – the Holy Spirit. That is the gist here. **4) hold it fast and 5) repent**

A. In five of the seven letters, they are commanded to repent. This should be our first step after sin. “Heavenly Father forgive me. Lord Jesus, savior, have mercy on me, a sinner. That was wrong. Forgive me and fill me with your Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit, lead and guide me. I want you to direct my thoughts and actions.”

**VIII. 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.** This language sounds like what we find in Matthew 24:42 where the suggestion is people were going to be surprised by the arrival of Jesus as Judge. It also seems relevant to people living in a city that dropped its guard and were surprised – and defeated – by people breaking in.

IX. **V4: Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes.** This suggests not all have fallen into sin. **They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.** Not sure what to make of the white, other than it suggests purity. (The book of Revelation is almost a picture book – it keeps describing images and colors and things)

X. <sup>5</sup> **The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.** This is the opposite of what Jesus says in Matthew 25. There are people who thought they were going to heaven and Jesus says, “No. I never knew you.”

XI. V6: **Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**

XII. So the fly over suggests a few things:

A. For starters, looks can be deceiving. We should know that, but often do not. The city of Sardis – and the church! - looked like a stronger, healthier entity than it was. It was living off the past. Looks – and old reputations – can be deceiving.

B. A second point to note is that the greatest threats often come from within. People, families, countries are often their own biggest problem. And this can also be churches. My personal experience is that I am my own biggest enemy. And that I have to keep waking up spiritually. Repenting and recommitting. And as a pastor, I have to keep reminding people, we are not here to hang out. We have a mission. We need to reach out, serve and be on mission. Without constant effort, churches turn inward. Without effort, churches go to sleep. Consequently, Jesus says to you – as an individual – and to us collectively – wake up. Pay attention to what matters.

C. Three, waking up involves repenting. I was reading some interesting things on repentance this week. A Christian psychologist reacting against the idea that repenting is psychologically unhealthy. That it leads to low self-esteem. His suggestion was, low self-esteem comes from too small a view of Jesus and that repentance and humility are the doors to greatness. We need a right view of ourselves in God’s eyes.

XIII. Let’s think for a minute more about the lawsuit idea.

A. The fact is, though we do not like accountability – we want the upsides of contracts without the downsides. We want guarantees that the other side must follow through without being bound ourselves.

B. God says to the believers in Sardis – and to you and me - we need to honor the contract. We need to obey.

C. And this is not new – we see it throughout the Old Testament. The prophets in the Old Testament frequently call those who are spiritually lax to account.

D. And we see it all through the New Testament. During my devotional reading last week I stumbled onto a few passages about obedience, including the passage in Luke where Jesus says, “If you hear these things, blessed are you.... If you obey.

E. And this letter to the Christians in Sardis suggests – in an odd way – that if we do not, he will sue.

1. He will try to force us to obey the contract.

2. We are expected to honor the deal. Repent.

XIV. Let me wrap this up by addressing two different groups – first those who already made a decision to follow Christ.

A. There is another call here for Christ followers to repent.

B. Some of you may be surprised by this. Let me be clearer, I am thinking here about those who are tired of not being better. Who are tired of still needing to be told to be better. You are surprised that you are not further along in your faith by now.

C. I get it. I suspect some of the surprise comes from people like me overpromising how easy the Christian life is going to be. But it is also because: we have a small view of both God, sin and the importance of our actions. We do not realize how massively holy He is, how profoundly broken we are, or how important the life we live is.

D. We think our growth will just happen over time with little effort or pain. And this all fits with the cultural promises around us – of instant results and quick fixes. Texting, email, online banking, fast food, instant potatoes; get in shape by taking a pill or turning on this machine or using this pillow.

1. All of these things raise our hopes and make us soft.

2. We end up expecting instant transformation rather than viewing our growth in Christ as a long-term — and potentially costly — endeavor.

E. Let me restate that Jesus is saying here: you have to attend to this. Your commitment is expected. It will cost you. There are no short cuts. Let me also remind you, it's now how you start that's important; it's how you finish.

F. Some of you have grown lax. Wake up. Repent and start moving in the other direction.

XV. Now let me say something to those of you who have yet to make a decision for Christ.

A. There is the assumption in this passage that those who are not Christ-followers should bend their knee and follow Christ. The book of Revelation is a celebration of Jesus. John gets to see him in His glory and his response is to collapse.

B. I want to invite you to do that.

C. Jesus doesn't promise that if you turn to him, your problems will go away right away. One day they will.

1. In Christ, this ends well. John gets a vision of that. For all of the confusion the book of Revelation causes if you read it – and way too many miss the forest for the trees. This is a book where we need the big picture. The big picture is Jesus wins and will be celebrated at a party in that w.

D. We do not turn to him because we are promised an easy life. We turn to him because He is who He claims to be. And he is the way forward.