

Christian In Name Only

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Preacher: Dylan Marais

[0 : 00] Don't you hate it when you buy something but it doesn't work properly? You know, you've got Christmas shopping coming up. And if you started your Christmas shopping, I did.

And you buy something, it's got a name for being something, but somehow you manage to get the knock-off version. So I bought my luxury item, in a sense, for this time, was I bought a robot vacuum.

But I bought it for my mom. And it's got a cool picture, it's black, it looks amazing.

It looks like Kit from Knight Rider, for those of you who know what I'm talking about. Anyway, but I got something that looked like, not Bugs Bunny, what's that beetle that, anyway, there's those old beetles, it looks like a beat-up car, basically.

It doesn't look like a cool car. It's this big, it doesn't even fit in the dining room or anything. And instead of all these brushes and a vacuum thing, it's got these two little brushes. And it's supposed to be a smart thing, and all it did was just find the first corner it could find, and then hid in the corner and sort of sulked there until the battery ran out.

[1 : 22] But maybe you don't buy, you know, robot vacuum cleaners every day. Well, Burevors. I don't know if you've noticed the Burevors that we've been buying recently.

I don't know if you look at the fine print I do now, because it's over 100 rand a kilo now for most Burevors. And then you see, but it's 20% water.

And you'll notice that if you're buying it in your pan at home, and this big juicy Burevors disappears before your very eyes, and the water level rises in the pan. You can't feed yourself.

You've bought something, you've spent some money on something, it's not worth what it says on the label. You want it, whatever you buy, you want it to do the thing that it claims to do.

You want to do what you expect it to do. And in our letter today, we find out that Jesus wants the exact same thing with us as Christians.

[2 : 22] If we claim to be a Christian, he wants us to be the real thing. And the problem in the church that Sardis was facing is that they were Christians in name only.

They had great packaging, but the reality was not living up to it. And it's a problem that of all the letters to the churches in Revelation, I think it hits closest to home, because the situation they found themselves in is closest to the situation we find ourselves in here at St. Mark's in the modern world. We'll find out that the church in Sardis are suffering from a very subtle but deadly problem, and the problem of nominal Christianity. The problem of nominal Christianity.

The church in Sardis doesn't have the extreme problems that we find in the other churches in the book of Revelation. They're not under any immediate threat of persecution. They're living a happy, easy-going, easy-go-lucky type of Christianity.

The thing is, they've decided what their level of commitment is, what they're happy with, how much they're willing to give, and it's not a level that's going to change or challenge anything or anyone.

[3 : 36] They think they're doing well, but Jesus, their king, is not happy with them. Instead of being about their master's business, they're sleepwalking through life, and they've got about them a stench of death.

So just have a look at verse 1. The opening words to what Jesus is saying. I know your deeds. You have a reputation. You've got a name of being alive. But you're actually dead. That word reputation is the Greek word for name.

They've got a name for being alive. They've made a name for themselves. But it's not based on what Jesus wants. And therefore, it's not based on any reality. It's based on what they've decided their Christianity will look like.

So it's not a real Christian name. It's a pretend name. They're nominal Christians. Nominal means in name only. It's existing or being something in name or form, but not in reality.

[4 : 48] It's pretending to be the real thing. But it's not. Just think about yourself. What kind of a name are you striving for in your life?

What reputation are you making for yourself? We all want to be known for something. But the Sardis Christians were more worried about what the culture would say about them, what their friends would, what their families would, what the people they work with would say, what the general culture would say.

They're more worried about that than about what Jesus, their king, would say about them. So here's a question to ask yourself if you're a nominal Christian or not.

You don't want to be one because Jesus has some harsh words to say about that kind of Christianity. But here's a question to ask yourself. Are any of your friends or family aware that you are any different to them at any level?

Do they know that you go to church? Can they see it in the way that you live and how you respond to the stuff that they say and do? If none of your friends or family are aware that you're any different to them, check to see whether you are indeed living to honor Jesus' name and not just protecting your own reputation.

[6 : 17] It's clear that the church of Sardis weren't living up to what they were supposed to be doing. They were seen as dead because their works were incomplete. So Jesus continues with the problems that he sees there in verse 2.

He tells them to wake up, to strengthen what remains, and it's about to die. So there's an urgency. They think they're okay. They think they've got life. And Jesus says, well, you're at the precipice. You're about to go down and you don't even know it. And he says all of this because I've not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

I've not found your deeds, your works, complete. In the sight of my God. Their works are incomplete. Incomplete here means not at full capacity.

They have something going. They've got something going. It's not a heck of a lot. They're not going all out. They're not even going half out.

[7 : 17] It looks like they're just bobbing along, floating along, going with the flow, as if they're going through the motions. I think that hits pretty close to the same situation we find ourselves in the modern church here at St. Mark's as well.

We're not being persecuted to any really serious degree. And so the temptation is to take it easy. Take it or leave it kind of a Christianity.

We can easily fool ourselves into thinking that we can craft our own level of commitment and service to Jesus. Well, how do you know if that's you?

Because we fool ourselves so easily. Well, the easiest way is to see, we see it in those who come to church but don't come to church. They do, but they don't.

Maybe that's you. Maybe you feel like you're dipping your toes in. You just want to check it out. You'd go just enough to pat yourself on the back.

[8 : 28] But you don't want to be seen as too committed. You don't want your friends or family to know or to think that there's something wrong with you. It's a bit like having a gym membership but never using it.

And that's probably the majority of people who get their gym membership and say, oh yes, they're going to do it, and they never get going. You're never going to get fit and healthy unless you actually go to gym and use the equipment.

It's the same with going to church. And so if you find yourself in that space where you dip in and out of coming to St. Mark's or whichever church you find yourself, and there could be a variety of reasons that's understandable.

I'm not sure, though, that your excuses are going to find any traction with Jesus. You think they're okay. And every now and then there's a valid excuse. You could be really, really, really sick.

But I'm not sure those kind of excuses, the ones we normally give, are going to fly with Jesus. And so you want to see, if you're dipping in and out of going to church, just notice to yourself, hmm, okay, that's probably an indication that I'm a nominal Christian.

[9 : 49] It's probably an indication that my Christianity is defective. I think I'm doing okay. But if we don't see you here a lot, then it's difficult for us to say. To say, hey, listen, yeah, we think you're

doing okay.

In fact, you probably find that you're struggling a lot in life. One of the indicators of not a life that's going easy, but a life that's going well, that's well adjusted, that's trusting God, is people who go to church often, go to the different things that church offers and serve.

It's just one of those indicators. We see it so often in the ministry, from a pastor's perspective. The ones who don't go to church often are the ones that struggle the most.

And so what you want to do, you want to get involved in the life of the church. It's like going to gym. The more you're put in, the more you're going to get out.

Now, we don't often think of making an effort and working hard for our Christianity. In fact, in our circles, doing works is often frowned upon. Not doing works, but just the way we think about it.

[11:01] Because the last thing you want to do is work for your salvation. And obviously, we don't work for our salvation. But there's so much in the New Testament about strengthening yourself, about getting going, about doing things, about being active in God's kingdom, because He's given you the power to do that.

I'm just going to show you two verses from Paul about how he thinks it's important to give everything in service to Jesus. So, Paul in Philippians 3 says this, This one thing I do, forgetting what is behind, and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

He's going for it. He's talking here in the context of running a race. Not everyone wins the prize. And he says, Make sure that you run so that you get the prize.

Don't just float along. You might find yourself floating down the wrong river. Then in Colossians, he says this, Whatever you do, talking to the church again, whatever you do, work heartily.

Put your whole effort into it, your whole body, your whole soul, your whole mind, your whole body, your whole strength. Work heartily as for the Lord, and not for men, or in brackets, for yourself.

[12:28] Knowing that from the Lord, you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. So if you find yourself in this kind of situation, this easygoing Christianity, a Christianity that's in name only, popping into church, no one else in your immediate family or friend circle actually knows that you're a Christian, or it's a Christianity that they're absolutely fine with.

And I'm not saying we've got to go out and fight everyone. I'm not saying that at all. But if the world is a certain way, and it's full of evil, and full of ugliness, and full of what the Bible calls sin, it's a smelly thing, it's a stench to God the way that people live, and the way that they talk.

If the world is like that, and you're a Christian that looks and sounds like that, this letter is telling you, be careful, you may not be a Christian at all. If you find yourself in that place, where you're just going along for the ride, having a pretense, but not the reality, what does Jesus say is the remedy? What must they do to change? What is the path back to genuine relationship with Him from this letter? Well, verse 2 and 3 hold the key for us.

And Jesus says, wake up. You can easily translate that, watch it. You've all been told to watch it in your life by your mom or your dad when you're being naughty.

[14:12] Wake up. Strengthen what remains and is about to die. Get a bit of muscle. Get a bit of backbone.

For I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, verse 3, therefore, what you've received and heard. Obey it.

Keep it. Guard it. Do it. And repent. Wake up and strengthen what you've got.

So we need to stop sleepwalking through life. We've got to open our eyes and not judge ourselves based on our own standards or compared to other people, but ask, what kind of life does Jesus want me to live?

What are His standards of excellence when it comes to His living in His kingdom? He doesn't want zombified Christians that look and sound like the rest of the world. He came to give us life.

[15:13] To take dead things and make them alive again. It's like that saying, when you go to the gym, you don't skip leg day. You don't skip leg day at the gym.

You go to the gym, you've got to give yourself a full body workout. You need to strengthen all your muscle groups and not leave one area unattended. Maybe you come to church, maybe you are coming to church regularly, but you've never thought of serving beyond just walking through those doors, grabbing a quick cup of tea and getting out as quickly as you can.

The answer is to get stuck in. There's only one way to be active and that's just to do it. You've got to live your Christianity out in the sight of God, in the sight of your friends and families.

As the saying goes, we've got to get busy living or get busy dying. And so we're to wake up and strengthen what we've got.

That means, as I say, putting on a bit of backbone, putting a bit of muscle into how you live your Christian life. But we do that by doing what Jesus lays out in the rest of those verses.

[16:31] We do that primarily by remembering. They've got to remember what they first received and heard. What's Jesus saying there? Well, that's... The thing that made the difference in your life, the thing that makes the difference in every genuine Christian's life, is hearing about Jesus, hearing about who He is, hearing about what He did to save you, and then acting on that.

It's the gospel. We must remember the gospel. We've got to get back to the basics. Remembering what Jesus came to do and what it cost Him. What it cost Him to do it.

Jesus died so you could live. And He didn't just die so that one day you get to go to be in heaven.

Yes, I know that's what most of us have been taught.

But He's died so that you can start living a new life now. So that your old way of living can change.

You don't have to get caught up in your past sin, your past guilt, your past shame, your past patterns.

Very often, Christians in name only, they're not happy people. Because they're trying to do two things. We'll hear later on the letter to Laodicea about Christians who are lukewarm.

[17:51] It's a little bit like that in Sardis, but not quite. But they're just going along with the flow.

And no one is happy in that situation. But you think you're getting a reputation in the world, but you're not.

They don't respect you. It's people who stand up for the truth. You might be hated, but you're going to get respect. It might not be from them. It's okay.

At least you'll get it from God and Jesus. But if you can't be bothered getting respect from God and Jesus and the angels, as we'll see in a bit, you'll get a little bit of respect, but like how much respect really are you going to get by being any different to the world out there?

They turn on their own very quickly. You can never keep up with what the world says is appropriate. It's always changing. And because they're not Christian, they don't love you.

They can turn on you in an instant. Jesus didn't come and die so that we could coast through life, sort of living life on the edges, hoping that no one sees anything about you.

[19:00] Pretending to be involved, but hoping to miss out on all the stuff that makes life hard. It doesn't work that way. Life is hard. It's always going to be hard. It's never going to be easy.

Nothing in life worth having is going to come easy. Of course, Jesus gives his people so many amazing blessings that living through the hardships of life with Jesus makes all the difference.

John, writing towards the end of his life, he wrote the book of Revelation, obviously, as well, but he wrote the letters of 1, 2, 3, and John, obviously the gospel as well, but John, writing towards the end of his life, has never, himself never moved beyond the basics, the gospel basics.

About who Jesus is and what he came to do. He never forgot that lesson. So, 1 John, chapter 1, we did it in our devotions some months ago. In fact, it was our first devotions, I think. John writes, that which was from the beginning, which we, talking about himself, he's actually seen these things, which we've heard, which we've seen with our own eyes, we've looked at and our hands have touched.

So he's talking about something that's really real. He's not making it up. This we proclaim concerning the word of life. Jesus came to give a message of life, of new life.

[20:24] That life appeared, we've seen it and testified to it, and we proclaim to you that that life can give you eternal life, life that really matters, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

And then it ends that section saying, we write this to make your joy complete. Jesus is the message of this new kind of life that lasts forever and brings joy and meaning and hope and peace, all the things we celebrate at Christmas time, brings all those things to reside in those who take hold of it. You just cannot find this kind of eternal life or joy trying not to live worrying about what others will think of you. It's just not doable. You're going to give up any kind of life by trying to live in between, in the middle.

What Jesus has given us, what Jesus has given us is what he's done for us is precious beyond measure. That's why he says we must keep it.

It means to grab it and hold it and guard it, to hold fast onto it as like a treasure. Hold it fast. So nominal Christianity has those truths, they know what Jesus has done and they don't care. [21 : 48] They take the most important thing that anyone can ever do for you which is give up their life for you and they're like ah, yeah, that's cool. I don't really want it. I mean, when I need it I'll ask you.

Now, if you're going to treat Jesus with that kind of contempt then don't be surprised when he says well then I don't really want you in my kingdom. But what I'm trying to point out is that anything else in comparison to what Jesus offers is of zero value.

You can try and keep your name. You can try and keep it in a more or less good standing in the world. But the value of this world is really not worth having in comparison to what Jesus offers.

We're always going to have a short, hard, life is short, life is not easy and it's going to be in some sense unfulfilled. It's always going to have conflict, there's always going to be trouble.

You can try and duck around it as much as you can but none of us gets through life having everyone say nice things about us all the time. So to aim to receive the greatest rewards or accolades or reputation in this life is selling yourself short.

[23 : 11] It's far better to be found worthy and acknowledged by Christ before God and the angels. And so that's the promise of what genuine Christianity offers. The promise of what genuine Christianity offers.

And so Jesus goes on to give us the ultimate reason for not being contempt with a name that either you gave yourself or a name that the world has given you because they think you're like them. And that is a promise that Jesus makes to those who fight against having a worldly name that lasts for a short time but trust in him to give him a name, to give you a name that lasts forever.

So have a look at verse 5. The one who conquers will be clothed in white garments and I will never blot his name out of the book of life.

I will confess his name before my father and before his angels. In the ancient world, white robes were worn by those who took part in triumphal processions, marking them out as victors over their enemies.

And then each city would have a roll call of those who were citizens of that city and then they would receive, as every name was written in those scrolls, they would receive various parts of the bounty that was taken from their enemies.

[24 : 38] A bit like going to the parade when the springboks came back from the World Cup. And it's so cool to be part of that parade. But one day we're going to take part in the greatest victory parade ever.

The whole world is going to witness it. The thing is, everyone's name is going to be called. The question is, will you stand there in a white robe, clean, beautiful, pure, or are you going to stand there in your sin-soiled rags, smelly, and yucky?

And people are going, oh, that doesn't smell or look nice or look good. We don't want that here. Or you've got a choice. You can either be accepted by people now, hey, welcome, nice to have you, and be rejected later if you don't live a life committed to Christ.

Or you might be rejected by those now, but then you're going to be welcomed by Jesus. Will Jesus know you and declare that you are worthy to enter into eternal life and then honor you in front of God and all the angels?

And you think to yourself, the angels, what's going on here? But it's there in the text. I will acknowledge his name before my father and his angels.

[26 : 12] Well, just think about what happens on judgment day. So you've got God, Christ, but that's, there's you, there's your family, there's everyone who's ever known you, they've all got to make a judgment, they're going to say what your life was like, and then these angels.

But now you're in the throne room of God, that's where this judgment day takes place. Go back to Daniel 7, we've been there a few times, it's the throne room of God. And the angels there aren't just the ones that came to give Mary and Joseph the news, and even those angels people are scared about, because they're so holy.

They just scare you because they're so holy. We're talking about the seraphim, the cherubim, these are like throne guardian angels, you know the ones that look like lions, have got wings, and fire, and eyes, and they're totally freaky.

And these huge creatures of might and power will know you. When Jesus says, this guy's with me, hey, seraph, I'd like you to meet Alex.

You know, he lost his job because of me. They'll be like, whoa, cool. Hey man, sorry about the job, but well done for honoring Christ. Or meet Faith.

[27 : 38] She's a medical doctor, and she was killed in giving service to a part of the world that doesn't like Christians. And these angels that serve God are going to be like, whoa, well done.

Or here's John. He spent a lot of time in jail because he didn't bow to political correctness. And then they'll bow as you walk past them.

Not because they honor you, but because you love Jesus, and they love him, and you've honored him by not bowing to the pressure of having a name the world honors, but in so doing, dishonoring Christ.

Jesus says in Matthew chapter 10, talking about this very thing, whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.

But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven. And whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

[28 : 47] whoever finds their life will lose it. Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. So friends, what do you want to do?

Live so that you win that prize and that name and have your name upheld forever in the book of life. That's worth living for, that's worth dying for, that's worth having a name for.

Well, let's pray to God and ask him to help us to do that, to strengthen us to live like that. Father God, we are so weak and vacillating.

We want to be committed to you, Lord, but it's the pressures of this world are real. And yet, Lord, we've got the strength of your word, your gospel, and your Holy Spirit, and so we're sorry for not living lives that are reflective of our status in your kingdom.

Lord, will you wake us up? Will you strengthen us to do your work? Will you help us to remember who Jesus is and what he's done in our life?

[30 : 08] And help us, Lord, to live for your name and your kingdom, your glory and not ours.

Amen.