

Repentance From Dead Works

~Other Speakers M-R: Richard Owen Roberts:

The biblical demand for repentance is in two separate and distinct areas: repentance from sin and, repentance from dead works. You say, "I have repented!" Have you repented of all your sins? You say, "I have repented!" Have you repented of all your dead works?

In summarizing the wonderful difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, the author of the Book of Hebrews contrasts the effectiveness of the shedding of blood. Under the Old Covenant the blood of bulls and of goats and the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer symbolically purified the flesh (9:13). That is to say, the sacrificial system of the Old Testament was itself external and produced external results. A ceremonially unclean person was ostracized from the assembly of the people, but through a proper sacrifice or offering could be restored to normal life. Under the New Covenant, however, the effect of shed blood is far from external. Ponder this biblical question, "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (9:14). The blood of Christ affects the inner man. It is the conscience that it purges, But did you ever wonder why the issue in this passage is dead works and not sin? Why are we not told here that the blood of Christ purges the conscience from sin? What does it mean to have the conscience purged from dead works?

In considering this tremendous question, let us remind ourselves of an earlier passage in this same epistle. At the end of the fifth chapter of Hebrews the author declares he has many things to say (verse 11ff) which are hard to be uttered because of the dullness of hearing of those to whom he writes. In warm, but urgent tones, he reminds them that, while they ought to be teachers, they still need to be taught the first principles of the oracles of God. While they ought to be able to digest the strong meat of the Word of God, they are still so unskillful in the word of righteousness that they must be fed with milk like babes. To cater to their lower instincts and to encourage them in their slovenly spiritual ways is absolutely contrary to the purpose of the epistle. Thus the author states his unwillingness to deal again with the first principles of Christianity and after mentioning them in passing, goes on to warn, in the severest possible language, those who are not pressing on to perfection (6:4-12). Consider, please, what he lays down as foundational principles: 1. Repentance from dead works; 2. Faith toward God; 3. Baptisms; 4. Laying on of hands; 5. Resurrection of the dead; and 6. Eternal judgment (Hebrews 6:1,2).

Did you notice that first foundational principle: repentance from dead works? I put it to you bluntly: are you aware that repentance from dead works is a first principle of Christianity? Need I remind you now that it is repentance from dead works and not merely repentance from sin that is here declared foundational?

Have you ever repented of dead works? Has your conscience been purged from them so that you might serve the living God? It is evident that if these questions are to be answered with integrity, we must understand what dead works are and what repentance from them involves.

DEAD WORKS DEFINED

First, any religious act calculated to gain merit with God by human effort is a dead work. Worship can be dead work. Prayer can be dead work. Hymn singing can be dead work. Tithing can be dead work. Deeds of kindness can be dead works. Accepting Jesus Christ can be dead work. Fasting can be dead work. Preaching can be dead work. R. C. H. Lenski wrote:

Some think that "dead" means "sinful" works in general. These certainly would be dead weight on the conscience. Yet here [Hebrews 9.14] as well as in Hebrews 6.1, "dead works" are scarcely crimes and flagrant breaches of law but rather all formal, empty, false legal observances and self-invented works whereby men would seek to stand before God".(1)

It is possible to turn any act of worship, devotion or service into a dead work.

Consider this shocking fact: large numbers of persons can tell you the very day and hour they accepted Christ as their personal Savior but live as if they belong to the devil rather than to God. Many professing Christians even believe it is possible to accept Christ as Savior while rejecting Him as Lord, Evangelists and pastors have frequently taught people this possibility. It is not uncommon to hear a public invitation at the end of a service phrased somewhat as follows:

I appeal to all who have never received Christ as their Savior to accept Him now. Will you not respond? Please raise your hand. Now I want to speak to those of you who have already received Christ as your Savior and are

sure that you are on your way to heaven. You know that you have not yet received Christ as your Lord. Are you willing to accept Him as your Lord tonight? Please raise your hand.

Do these words sound familiar to you? They suggest a whole new doctrines two-phase salvation which allows a person to be rescued from hell by accepting Christ as a fire escape and then, if desired, a second option of being rescued from sin and self by yielding to Jesus Christ as Lord.

Where, in the entire New Testament, can a doctrine like this be found? Did the Lord Jesus Christ ever tell people He would save them from hell while they still retained control of their own lives? His very own words thunder against such nonsense: "And why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? (Luke 6:46); "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven."(Matthew 7:21); and "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."(Matthew 6:24).

Accepting Jesus Christ as Savior has become for millions of professing Christians nothing but a dead work. For many of them there has been no turning from sin and self and no yielding to the Lord Jesus Christ. Without genuine repentance there can be no genuine conversion. The true Christian has the life of God in him. This life is received by exchange: a life for a life-His life for my life. When I come to the end of myself and in faith surrender to Him, casting all upon Him, He replaces my broken and ruined life with His own life. Christ does not give life to those already satisfied with the life they have. It is impossible to have Christ as Saviour but not as Lord. One cannot be saved from hell without being saved from sin and self. To pretend otherwise is hypocrisy. To teach otherwise is heresy.

An excellent illustration of what it means to follow Christ as a dead work is found in chapter six of the Gospel of John. The passage opens with the declaration that Christ went over the Sea of Galilee and a crowd followed Him because they saw His miracles and were impressed. Jesus went up into a mountain with His disciples to teach, but in glancing up, He saw the great crowd coming once more. Jesus asked Philip about feeding the multitude and by a wonderful miracle did so with five barley loaves and two small fishes brought by a mere lad. Jesus then perceived that the crowd planned to take Him by force and make Him a king, so He slipped away to Capernaum. The crowd eagerly followed Him there also. Jesus, knowing exactly what was in their hearts, said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you, for on Him the Father, even God, has set His seal."(John 6:26,27).

That this crowd had been laboring for meat that perishes is evident in the amount of energy they spent chasing Jesus from place to place. In response to His demand, the people inquired, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus replied, This is the work of God that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent (verses 28,29). Although they had been following Him zealously, instead of now declaring their belief, they skirted the issue, saying, What sign showest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? "What dost thou work? (verse 30). If it were not so tragic, we might almost laugh. They had already seen miracle after miracle, but when commanded to believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord God, they asked for yet another miracle. What is really in their hearts is revealed in verse 31, Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat. They were saying, in other words, "Jesus, as long as you feed us free bread and give us what we want, we will follow you, but don't lay any claims of Lordship upon us." Jesus then turned their request for bread into a beautiful unfolding of His true nature-the Bread come down from heaven. However, it was bread for the belly, not bread for the soul, that really interested this crowd. The chapter closes with the revelation that from that time many of Jesus' disciples went back and walked with Him no more. When Jesus asked the Twelve if they would go away also, Peter, who was just beginning to grasp the difference between dead works and living faith, declared, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God (verses 68,69).

Many obviously followed Jesus for what they hoped to get out of Him. These poor Jews loved free bread and were ready to receive it all the time, but they did not love the truth and were not willing to have it laid on them continually. As long as they got what they wanted without price and obligation, they were greatly interested. When the demands of faith and submission were laid down, however, their enthusiasm for Jesus fled rapidly.

Are there not many in our churches today who have accepted Christ for what they can get out of Him? They don't want to be forever lost and so they accept Christ as Savior. Let me emphasize the words they accept Christ. This is something they do, and having done it, they suppose that God is now in their debt and under their obligation. God cannot send them to hell, they think. After all, they have accepted Christ. They have not

yielded to his Lordship or really believed what He says, but they still consider themselves safe because of what they have done. May I remind you again that anything man does to gain merit or favor with God is a dead work!

For millions, accepting Christ is every bit as much a dead work as was clamoring for free bread. Is there really any significant spiritual difference between seeking to use Christ for free food and seeking to use Christ as an escape from future danger? Jesus told those seeking bread, This is the work of God that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent, but rather than believe, they went away and ceased the pretense of following. Is it not probable that the organized church would experience a dramatic drop in membership if every member with the same heart disposition toward Christ as had these unbelieving Jews were to cease all pretenses of following Jesus?

Men are not Christians because of what they do but because of what Christ does. Consider again the words of John 6:28,29: "What shall we do that we might work the works of God?" "this is the work of God that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent" (italics mine). They were more than ready to work-even to make Christ king by force-but they were neither ready nor able to believe. And because they would not believe, nothing else they were willing to do mattered. Genuine faith is the one thing commanded and the only thing that really counts in becoming a Christian.

In seeking to clarify the crucial issue of true belief, some teachers have emphasized the difference between believing in the head and believing in the heart. This is, doubtless, an important distinction, but may I say to you there is an even greater distinction between believing in Christ and believing Christ. One can believe in Christ with both the head and the heart and never really believe Him. We have already seen an outstanding example of this. The great crowd that followed Jesus believed in Him so much they were ready to make Him king against His own will; but when He told them what to do, they ceased to follow Him.

Satan believes in Christ. The evidence makes it plain that he believes in Christ with both his head and his heart. He has no doubts concerning the central issues. He was present in much that transpired and participated directly in many of the events. He taught Judas to steal and practice deception. He aroused the Jewish leaders to crucify Christ. He helped Peter with his denials and taught the soldiers to make the false claim that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus by night. He even put the doubt in the heart of Thomas.

The devil knows Jesus is God. He knows that Jesus died to save men from sin and self. The devil knows the power of Christ's resurrection and is convinced of the ascension of Christ to heaven. The devil even trembles at what he knows and believes. But with all his trembling, he remains obdurate still. While he believes in Christ, he will not believe Christ-that is, he will not do what Christ says.

The devil will not repent or submit himself to Christ's Lordship. The devil will not cease having his own way. Therefore, all that he believes about Jesus Christ the Lord is totally without merit and absolutely unable to help him. Satan is doomed! He has already been conquered! He will soon be cast into hell forever! Knowing all this, he still refuses to bow his knees to Jesus and submit to His Lordship. Thus he remains lost forever.

Christ made it perfectly plain to all His followers that He is Lord. He still demands yieldedness to this fact today. He insists that men cannot have two lords, for either they will hate the one and love the other or else they will hold to the one and despise the other (Matthew 6:24). Men cannot have Christ as Lord while still being lords of themselves. If Christ is to reign in a person's life, that person must cease to reign. No heart throne is large enough for two rulers. If the throne of one's life is not yielded to Christ, then that unyielded person is not believing Christ. And if he is not believing Christ, he is not a Christian. Any outward responses to Christ without genuine faith are none other than dead works which require repentance.

If you will not believe Christ on the issue of His Lordship, you cannot be saved. It does not matter what overt responses you have made toward Christ. If He is not Lord of your life, then you are lord. If you are lord you are still in your sins, Even if you can remember the exact sermon that moved you to tears and the very words of the invitation that caused you to walk down the aisle, even if the face of the counselor who led you in a formula prayer is clearly remembered and the emotions of joy and relief that followed that prayer are still present and the Scripture verses of assurance provided you at that time are still remembered, if Christ is not the Lord of your life, then you have still to believe Him. Anything else you have done other than believing Him is a dead work requiring repentance and from which your conscience needs to be purged.

The great truth the coming revival must emphasize is repentance from both sins and from dead works. No dead work is more prominent in religious circles today than the formal, empty, false, legal acceptance of Christ without yielding to His Lordship in genuine faith. When a wave of God-sent repentance sweeps over the Church

and false professors become genuine converts, the world will be forced to sit up and take notice.

The empty formality of accepting Christ, however, is not the only dead work being relied upon for merit with God. Church attendance and participation can be a dead work. Anyone supposing he has gained merit by attending religious services is in obvious trouble with God. Worship is always a dead work if it is not acceptable to God. Jesus told the frequently married Samaritan woman, God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). God cannot be worshiped with mere human voices raised in songs of praise. Uttered prayers may not constitute worship either. If God is Spirit, how can He be worshiped by mere physical means? Men truly worship Him only when they worship Him in ways He commands. Men worship God only when they worship Him in spirit. It is possible to be in a physical sanctuary, singing from a hymnbook made of physical things, uttering praise with a physical tongue and listening to a sermon delivered by a physical man, while the inner spirit is miles away on the golf course or at home fussing over the Sunday dinner. If you do not worship God in spirit and in truth, all your worship is dead work. Do you need to repent of this?

Tithing and giving of offerings can be dead works, True giving is from the heart. Every man according as he purposes in his heart, so let him give, not grudgingly or of Necessity for God loveth a cheerful giver (Second Corinthians 9:7). To give out of constraint or because you are embarrassed to have the offering plate pass in front of you without putting something in could hardly be described as cheerful giving. Some people are quick to respond to organized appeals for financial help and may give largely when their sympathies are touched, but giving done for unworthy reasons is nothing short of a dead work requiring repentance.

Any act of devotion or charity, any service rendered to others, even preaching the Word of God or teaching a Sunday school class, can be a dead work if the heart is not right before God. Have you repented of the dead prayers you have offered? Have you repented of the hymns you have sung when your heart has been empty? Have you repented of the charitable gifts you have given in the hope of recognition? Have you repented of the deeds of kindness you have shown for the praise you hoped to receive? Have you repented of all the good works you performed and expected God to notice?

We owe it to our own souls to be certain that we are not engaged in any religious actions calculated to gain merit with God or upon which we are relying to earn us mercy or favor. Surely there could be no greater tragedy than to put confidence in such erroneous thinking. The God of all mercies has made His demands plain. Let us not presumptuously suppose His Word applies to others but not to ourselves. Dead works are never acceptable to God, not even when they are ours!

Second, any work which has no capacity to be made alive by the Spirit of God is a dead work. This type of dead works may be divided into two distinct classes:

Those dead works which cannot be made alive by the Spirit of God because they are contrary to the mind and heart of God and erroneous in and of themselves. Consider the act of praying for the eternal salvation of those already physically dead. This is a common practice but based upon serious error. A man's eternal destiny is fixed at the time he departs this life. To pray for a change in his eternal destination after he has already died is to suppose that a second chance is provided somehow, somewhere in the afterlife. Such a supposition renders absurd the words of Hebrews 9:27,28: And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the Judgment. so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many.. (emphasis mine). Men have opportunity to repent and believe Christ in this lifetime; what they do with Christ in life determines their eternity. To pray for salvation of those already condemned because of unbelief is to ignore the plain Word of God and to engage in a work that can never be made alive by the Spirit of God.

Consider also the problem of speaking when it is time to be silent. There are occasions when words help and times when words hinder. If a person does not learn to control the tongue, he may, on occasion, speak good and sacred words without benefit to his hearers. Notice these Proverbs, He that reproveth a scorner getteth to himself shame... (Proverbs 9:7); Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate thee.. (Proverbs 9:8); A scorner heareth not rebuke (Proverbs 13:1). From these and similar passages, it is evident that men must learn when and with whom to speak. If a professing Christian insists on sharing the Gospel at all times, in all places, and with all men, but without regard to their immediate attitudes or to the prompting of the Spirit of God, he may well be engaging in a work that will not be quickened by the Spirit and which must then be correctly labeled dead. Jesus Himself instructed us, Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you (Matthew 7:6). To fail to heed this biblical instruction is to risk engaging in work which is contrary to the will of God and which is thus a dead work requiring repentance.

Those works which cannot be made alive because the worker is living in unresolved sin are even more crucial. The Psalmist was led by the Spirit of God to declare, If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me (66:18). It is possible to pray fervently without being heard by God. Unconfessed and unforsaken sin is such a barrier between man and God that years of praying and performing religious works can be nothing but deadness. Jesus hammered this point home in Matthew 5:23,24: If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

Many seemingly good and useful religious works are rendered dead by unresolved sin. There are deacons who have sinned against their wives and steadfastly refuse to repent. Thus they are guilty, not only of the sin itself, but also of turning the office of deacon into a farce. There are ministers in the grip of greed whose eloquent sermons and fervent pulpit prayers are nothing but dead works. There are Sunday school teachers who minister death instead of life because their own hearts are not right with God. There are church ushers whose welcoming smiles are a mockery because they regard iniquity in their hearts. Instead of placing money in the offering plate, many a church attender needs to rise from the worship service and go out and make things right with the brother he has wronged. Is it any wonder that so many churches are more like sepulchers than healing places when those in positions of leadership are dying of the very diseases they profess to be curing in others? Why should we be surprised when unbelieving multitudes hold such churches in disdain? And if men and women outside the church are not fooled by hypocrites engaged in dead works, why should unrepentant religious workers suppose God cannot see through their thin veneer?

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that the preacher who lives in unconfessed and unforsaken sin will lose his power of eloquence or pastoral abilities. I am not saying that his sermons will become dull and that he will be unable to attract crowds or that no one under his ministry will be stirred or excited, helped or blessed. To the contrary, his eloquence and power may seem greater than ever, but if his works are dead before God, does anything else matter?

The prayer of the person regarding iniquity in his heart may sound like the most fervent and sincere prayer offered during the entire Wednesday evening prayer meeting and still be dead. Unconfessed sin might not wipe the smile from the face of the usher; it might not change the pleasant disposition of the chairwoman of the missionary committee; it might not make the youth leader irresponsible and egotistical. However, if it renders their works dead, need any more be said?

When revival comes, repentance from all works which have no capacity to be made alive by the Spirit of God can be expected.

Third, any work which is done in the energy of the flesh and not in the power of the Holy Spirit is a dead work. Much preaching is dead. Many pastors cease their preparations when they know what they are going to say and have arranged it in a pleasing manner. The most difficult, and certainly the most important, part of sermon preparation is that which is done after the sermon itself is ready. If the preacher does not carefully prepare his own heart for each preaching opportunity his efforts may be nothing more than dead work. It is the Spirit, not human words, who gives life. The neglect of earnest prayer and heart preparation is one of the gravest temptations facing the clergy today and it appears that many regularly succumb to it.

Personal witnessing can be, indeed often is, nothing more than dead work. It is possible to witness to another without any feelings of love toward them, without any deep concern for their lostness and without significant reliance upon the Holy Spirit. Indeed, some appear to witness more for the purpose of adding up converts than for the glory of God and the good of men. Others witness more out of compulsion than compassion or more out of habit than heart-felt interest in the lost and dying.

All church work-the eldership, ushering, Sunday school teaching, choir singing, solo work, or any other of a host of good and needed services-can be performed in the power of the flesh and not in the power of the Spirit. In fact, it is easier and simpler to do one's religious duty in the flesh rather than in dependence upon the Holy Spirit. To serve in the flesh, one simply has to decide what to do and then to do it. Perhaps most are not that crass. The general procedure is to decide what to do, ask God in a perfunctory way to bless it, and then proceed, presuming divine blessing.

To do everything in the Spirit is much more difficult and demanding. It necessitates searching our motives and submitting our methods to His scrutiny. We must rely upon God to produce the results rather than upon

ourselves. For active people who like to wade into a job and get it done and who then like to step back and admire what they have accomplished, working in the power of the Holy Spirit can be almost too difficult to consider.

Waiting on God is part of working in the Spirit. God's timetable is not usually the same as man's. We want to get things done when we are ready. Accomplishing them in the power of the Spirit will require us to wait for God and not rush ahead of Him. Wading into a task is usually much easier than praying hour by hour until the Spirit of God is ready to move. But if we insist on acting ahead of the Spirit, we should at least have the grace to admit we cherish the flesh more than we cherish the Spirit and find no great problem with dead works.

Have you ever wondered why revivals are so rare? It has been a long time since a wide-scale, deep and powerful movement of the Holy Spirit has shaken our nation. Is the God who formerly moved His work forward so frequently by revival now operating on a different plan? Observe these revealing words written by James Brand, pastor of the First Church of Oberlin, Ohio, in 1883:

"There seems to have been for the last few years an undue exalting of the human elements in revivals, instead of laying hold directly of God Himself. It would seem that for some time churches have had their eyes fixed upon great movements, and have come to feel that no great results are to be expected without some mighty demonstration, and the heralding of some human evangelist. Since the time of Mr. Moody's great work in New York and Pennsylvania, revivals have declined, except in those places where these great movements have been made. This is not the fault of Mr. Moody's noble work, but the enemy is taking advantage of that work to keep the attention of Christians away from God Himself. The supernatural element has been too much ignored. People have been looking too much to externals, to methods, to men, to machinery, to "some new things, " and not enough to self-abasing, heartbroken, holy prayer."(2)

Putting it bluntly, it seems easier to do the work ourselves than to wait upon God for the enduement of power from on high. Thus, much of the work conducted in the name of Jesus Christ is doomed to eternal failure because it is nothing more than dead work.

The author of Hebrews tells us that repentance from dead works is a foundational doctrine. He encourages our repentance by revealing that the blood of Jesus purges our conscience from dead works so that we might serve the living God. To be certain this repentance and this purging are accomplished is a responsibility of gigantic proportions. Are you sure it has been accomplished in you?

Have you considered the stated relationship between purging the conscience from dead works and serving the living God (Hebrews 9:14)? It is only when all reliance upon dead works has been purged from the conscience that living works can be expected. Is your trust in dead works purged? Is your pleasure in dead works gone? Do you now truly serve the living God? Revival must emphasize repentance from every known form of dead works.