

Repentance From Dead Works

Hebrews 6:1

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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

I. Introduction:

- A. A few weeks back I brought a message from Job titled “Seeing Eyes Repent.” You may recall I focused on Job 42, verses 5 & 6, where we read of Job speaking to God saying, ***“I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. ⁶Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”*** We reviewed how Job, as he endured the tragic circumstances that God had providentially allowed Satan to inflict upon him – how he had come to harbor thoughts concerning God that were altogether contrary to the true character of God as Job had known Him. And so God spoke to Job with words of correction that brought him back to his spiritual senses so to speak, resulting in Job’s repentance as recorded at the end of the book.
- B. Now as I pointed out in that message, Job’s repentance can be likened to the repentance that all who are saved experience in their regeneration and conversion – when God first gives a sinner the spiritual faculties of the new birth. That is, when we’re given eyes to see Him as He is, not as we naturally imagine him to be. So those who are saved, change gods just like Paul wrote of the believers in Thessalonica, saying, ***“For they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God;”*** (I Thess. 1:9)
- C. So, in conclusion of that message on Job, I spent a great deal of time addressing how all sinners are likewise called to repent of former idolatry. We know that the popular idols of our day are not those constructed out of wood or stone but rather they are often the products of our own sinful imaginations as we imagine god to be altogether different from the true and living God – and so, an idol, constructed in our minds. And this, our idolatry, is exposed when God is pleased to reveal Christ to us as He is set forth in God’s Gospel – God’s way of salvation in and by Christ alone – a way of grace that is diametrically opposed to what most in our day refer to as “salvation by grace.”
- D. Those of you who heard that last message will recall that in summarizing God’s correction of Job, we observed how it could be equated to God basically confronting Job anew with these 2 eye opening questions: (1) “Who do you think I am?” And (2) “Who do you think you are?” Now Godly repentance springs from the revelation of faith that answers both of these questions.

1. Believers are confronted with a new reality of God as He is and so they change gods – they (1) repent of former idolatry;
2. But the revelation of faith also answers that other question, 2ndly, “Who do you think you are?” And as we see ourselves as we are in reality, as God sees us, as depraved sinners desperately in need of a perfect righteousness that we have no hope of producing, we repent of the notion that any of the works of our hand (referred to in the scripture as “dead works”) could dare rival the accomplished work that Christ, the God-man, alone could render and did render by His obedience unto death – His righteousness, not a righteousness of our own making.

E. So today, I would like to focus your attention on this aspect of believer’s repentance – the “Repentance from Dead Works.” That title is taken from my primary text in Hebrews 6:1 where we’ll begin our consideration of this important subject.

II. Repentance from Dead Works is a Foundational Doctrine:

A. Hebrews 5:12 - 6:1: Now leading up to Hebrews 6:1, at the close of chapter 5, Paul writes in verse 11 of how they were dull of hearing and commenting on this beginning in verse 12 we read, ***“For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. ¹³For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. ¹⁴But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. ¹Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God,”***

B. Now what I want you to notice here is that repentance from dead works and faith toward God are set forth as foundational principles of the doctrine of Christ.

1. Foundational – If it’s foundational, that means it is a vital, critical basic building block of the vital doctrine of Christ,
2. The doctrine of Christ – which speaks to the vital truth of the gospel that is believed upon by all those who are saved for as we read in 2 Jn 1:9: ***“Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son.”***
3. So, by this we know that repentance from dead works is an identifying characteristic (along with God-given faith) of all believers as it is foundational to the vital doctrine of Christ. And so, it is vital that you and I both understand and experience repentance from dead works.

III. Repentance from Dead Works is a Blood Work: (Hebrews 9:14)

- A. Hebrews 9:13-14: Now over in Hebrews 9, we have a comparison being made between the (1) offering of sacrifices (goats and calves) under the old covenant with (2) the supreme offering that these animal sacrifices foreshadowed, the sacrificial offering of the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God. And picking up in verse 13 we read, ***“For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: ¹⁴How 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?”***
- B. Notice what is contrasted here. First, we have the “sprinkling” (or the application) of the blood of animals whereby the nation Israel under the Old Covenant was set apart (the purifying of their flesh). Now that was a 1) physical application that was 2) temporary under the Old Covenant until Christ, the Lamb of God came and sacrificed His own blood so as to abolish that covenant by fulfilling all that was typified by it. But that physical sprinkling of animal blood did set that nation apart from all others temporarily – for that period of time. In verse 14, that application is contrasted with that which effected “much more.” That is – “How much more” shall the 1) spiritual application by the 2) eternal Holy Spirit of the shed blood of the sinless, spotless, Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, have its sure effect in purging of the conscience from “dead works” – the consciences of all those for whom that blood was shed. This sanctifying work – this setting apart is oh so much more for it is what sets apart spiritual Israel (those chosen unto eternal salvation from every nation) and it is not temporary – but eternal – setting apart those who possess eternal life.
- C. As we reflect on how this relates back to Hebrews 6 and the “repentance from dead works” mentioned there as a foundational principle, consider this: We only repent of that which we become convinced was folly – when we see the deadly error of our own former thoughts as it pertains to our own works – specifically that which proceeded from us that we attributed to having some bearing upon appeasing God’s just wrath against our sins (removing His disfavor) and / or we presumed to play a part in somehow gaining God’s favor. So all who repent of dead works do so because these works are purged from their conscience (their seat of judgment) in that they are seen for what they are, dead works, with no merit to be found in them.
1. First, notice from this passage in Hebrews 9 that this purging of our conscience from dead works, is a blood work. It is the fruit and effect of Christ’s shed blood, His redemptive work, that purges the conscience concerning “who we are in reality” – depraved sinners with nothing of merit to offer from our own hand (our own works) for we come to see such efforts as dead works.

2. You see, works of a saved sinner are only acceptable because of the sinner's personal standing as one who has been accepted before a holy and just God – accepted in the Beloved (as Eph. 1:6 puts it) – accepted in their Substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ. Oh, what a great transaction is set forth for us in 2 Cor. 5:21 where we read how Christ was made sin for us (He who knew no sin Himself) – the demerit of all the sins of God's elect imputed or charged to Christ that He might pay the penalty due unto God's justice. And then in turn that they might be made the righteousness of God in Him – that is, having the very merit of all that Christ accomplished by His perfect obedience, even unto death, in satisfaction to the strict the justice of God He made for them as their Substitute. That is the righteousness of God that is imputed or charged to the account of all those for Christ lived and died.

3. Now, as I've already alluded to, the conscience refers to our seat of judgment. And notice the definite connection between the purged conscience and serving the living God. Here we see how these 2 aspects of repentance, (1) repentance from idolatry (from a false god to the one, true and living God, and (2) repentance from dead works are inseparable as both are always manifested by all true believers. From the language of verse 14 we can know with a certainty that the purging of a sinner's conscience from dead works (as a result of Christ's shed blood for the sinner), is necessary in order for one to serve the living God? So here we see again how God brings those He saves to see aright both 1) who He is and 2) who we are – sinners in desperate need of God's grace to provide a perfect righteousness for us whereby we are found accepted in God's sight – a saving work we sinners cannot produce for ourselves.

D. So to recap, we've seen from:

1. Hebrews 6 that Repentance from Dead works is a Foundational Principle of the doctrine of Christ – of the Gospel. And...
2. From Hebrews 9 that this is a blood work – a direct and sure fruit and effect of Christ's accomplishment for His people on the cross.
3. And so one who repents of dead works is one whose conscience has been purged from dead works.

IV. Which was an Evil Conscience (Heb 10:22):

A. With that, look with me now in Hebrews 10, beginning in verse 19 where we read, ***“Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh;²¹ And having an high priest over the house of God;²² Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.”***

B. Here we see that one who draws near in full assurance of faith is one whose heart has been sprinkled from an “evil” conscience. So just as the purifying work of the sprinkling of the animal blood, the physical application of that being done on behalf of that chosen people so as to set them apart physically – likewise the hearts of the “brethren” (as they are called in vs. 19) who have boldness to enter into the very presence of God (saved sinners) are said to have their hearts sprinkled. That is, this blood work has been spiritually applied to them, as they are described here as having their hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience. So the purging of the conscience is the purging of an evil conscience. And let’s not gloss over this. It’s one thing to acknowledge the truth that salvation is not by works, but the conscience that has been purged sees the reality of how evil / awfully sinful (that which we before thought was good) truly is in God’s sight. I’ll come back and touch on this further in closing.

C. A washed people:

1. But first note here in Hebrews 10 that it says of these brethren (true believers) that their bodies are washed with pure water – it is speaking of their having been made pure in Christ – having the very perfection that He rendered on behalf of a people imputed or charged to the account of all of spiritual Israel – all who come to Christ in genuine, God-given faith and in repentance of dead works. And they are set apart in their own consciences as this is made known to them by the sure fruit of His shed blood – spiritual life – the washing of regeneration as it is called in Titus 3:5. So it is made known to these blood-bought sinners that they stand before God in Christ, (according to Colossians 1:22) as holy, and unblameable, and unreprieveable in His sight.
2. As we read Rev. 1:5 speaks of Christ in relation to those He saves, it says that He “... ***loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood,***”

D. Are you washed in the blood?

1. Well if so, we can know from Hebrews 10 that your heart has been (or will be) sprinkled from an evil conscience – the very blood of Christ having been shed for you so that, in time, you have (or you will have) turned from an evil conscience
2. That is – that evil conscience will have been purged from dead works (Hebrews 9)
3. And so – you will have repented of both former idolatry and dead works, those 2 inseparable aspects of initial Godly repentance that accompanies true faith – the turning to serve the true and living God. We know that’s so because as we saw in Hebrews 6, faith and repentance from dead works are set forth as foundational principles of the gospel – the doctrine of Christ in which all true believers are said to abide.

V. Distinguishing Dead Works – What is a Dead Work?

So seeing how the scriptures set forth clearly that all who are saved, washed in His blood, have their evil consciences purged from dead works so as to repent from dead works, then let’s spend a little time before we close examining in more detail what is meant by dead works.

- A. “Dead works” refers to any attempts of our own to attain or maintain salvation’s benefits – anything that proceeds from us that we imagine makes a difference in our going to heaven – in our eternal salvation. So “dead works” refers to anything other than (or in addition to) the imputed righteousness of God in Christ which we imagine contributes to our salvation. Such works are appropriately called “dead” works because those who are spiritually “dead” perform them” and because the ultimate end of those who never repent from dead works is eternal death. You see all who are saved, made spiritually alive or quickened, start out this life’s journey as spiritually dead men for as we read in Ephesians 2:1, “***And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins;***” And in that state all our works are dead works.
1. As Paul wrote in Romans 7:5, “***For when we were in the flesh, <lost – spiritually dead> the motions of sins, which were by the law, <in other words what we as sinners were moved to do in order to satisfy the holy demands of God> did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death.***” Now that “fruit unto death” can be equated to “dead works.”
 2. So godly repentance can only take place when one hears of and submits to the one righteousness – the only perfect satisfaction ever rendered to God’s holy law and justice – the righteousness of God in Christ (the merit of His work) – so as to rest in Christ and His righteousness alone for all of their salvation. Apart from this understanding, even the most sincere religious efforts on our part are characterized by God as “dead works” to be repented of. That is, we must turn from those things that we thought were commendable or meritorious – things that we thought would entitle us to heaven. In repentance, we forsake that which we formerly valued and thought made the real difference in our standing before God.
- B. According to our natural way of thinking, we object to the notion that our standing before God isn’t affected to some degree by our character and conduct. As self-righteous sinners, we know that our primary incentive to obey God would be removed if we bought into the idea that our character and conduct had no bearing on our standing before God. Consider how this reasoning so clearly proves how self-centered and consumed with self-love we all are by nature. From our sinful perspective we naturally conclude, “If my obedience actually has no bearing upon my acceptance before God, then I am left with no valid motive to even try to obey God. I would just eat, drink, and be merry and live like devil.”
- C. And this is a reasonable conclusion in light of the religion of man, the religion of works, which typically majors on trying to motivate sinners to sin less by working upon fallen man’s natural feelings of guilt, fear of punishment and death, and his natural mercenary desire for gain and reward. Such an emphasis only serves to strengthen our sinful resolve to establish a righteousness of our own. In Romans 7:5, God calls such widely respected efforts evil and “fruit unto death.”

VI. Closing:

- A. If we will just pause and consider what God has engaged in His way of salvation, based on the establishment of a perfect righteousness—the obedience and death of His Son, we should see that it is the highest form of pride, the highest reproach and insult to this holy, just, and righteous God, as well as the most blatant denial of Christ for any sinner to imagine that God would save him based on anything other than (or in addition to) that which Christ, the Savior, accomplished, the righteousness of God that He established as a Representative and Substitute for all those He saves.
- B. Anytime a person performs a moral or religious act while thinking it recommends him unto God or contributes to attaining or maintaining fellowship and favor with God, then he is bringing forth evil “fruit unto death,” dead works. These are those things that God tells us in Luke 16:15 are highly esteemed by others, but an abomination, an atrocity unto Him.
- C. Perhaps the clearest scriptural example of repentance from dead works and former idolatry is provided by the Apostle Paul’s description of his own spiritual conversion. Paul is described in I Timothy 1:16 as an appropriate pattern to any who would come to genuine faith and repentance. Well, in the 3rd chapter of Philippians, Paul describes his conversion and repentance, explaining that what he thought was “gain,” he now counted loss.
- D. Now that’s no small thing – especially for those who were steeped in religion such as I was. When by God’s grace, His Gospel of free and sovereign grace providentially came my way it turned my world upside down. By the power of the Holy Spirit, with the new eyes of God-given faith, I was confronted with the truth that up until then I had openly staked my eternal destiny on that which was now being exposed as “dead works.” My former religious dedication, the esteem in which I was held by other like-minded religious folks, the investment of time, money, and the energy spent influencing others – these were all obstacles to an objective consideration of the Gospel; yet, the God I came to know through the Gospel was wise enough, powerful enough, and loved me enough to overcome all obstacles, making the seemingly impossible, a reality.
- E. Why would anyone forsake and denounce all he had stood for in the past and call what others so highly esteemed, “dead works?” Was it because perhaps I was more humble than others or perhaps just not quite as obstinate as others? No, I came to Christ for all of my salvation because I was drawn irresistibly by God the Holy Spirit as a sure and certain result of what Christ had accomplished for me. You see I was blood-bought. Remember, as we saw in Hebrews 9, this purging of the conscience – this change in my judgment of things – is a blood work, the precious, effectual blood of Christ.

F. And so by God's grace, I came to see that even my act of faith, or any other seemingly honorable act of obedience, if presumed to play a causal role in my salvation, is not an acceptable act of obedience at all but actually evil, dead works in the sight of God. I've done things in the course of my life of which I'm ashamed, but know this – the most evil thing I've ever done on this earth was done in a religious context – placing my act of faith in rivalry with the effectual redemption that is exclusively by the shed blood of Christ.

G. As I've put it before, no one who truly believes God's gospel considers themselves saved because they believed. No, they believe because they are saved – because Christ paid their sin debt by His shed blood, buying them that precious gift of genuine faith and repentance – repentance from ever thinking they were saved because they believed or because of anything they have ever done or been enabled to do. True believers repent of such notions, such dead works, and look solely to the doing and dying of their Substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ.

H. So in summary, know this:

1. All who are saved manifest those evidences described in Hebrews 6 as foundational principles of the gospel (of the doctrine of Christ) – (1) repentance from dead works and (2) faith towards God.

2. And that is a blood work! It is by virtue of His shed blood that all them for whom that blood was shed in their respective lifetimes shall all be given:

(a) Faith to turn from idols to serve the true and living God

and, as I hope you've seen today...

(b) Their evil consciences are all purged from dead works, evidenced by their repentance from dead works.

May God so richly bless you!

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God's grace found in the only infallible source, God's word itself – the Bible.