

## FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES I: REPENTANCE FROM DEAD WORKS

Hebrews 6:1-2 NASB

*[1]Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of [b]repentance from dead works[/b] and of faith toward God,*

*[2]of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.*

### **Introduction**

There is a great deal to learn about the Lord. The Bible is a very big book indeed and written in such a way that you really want to know what it says in order to learn anything in it. It does not yield itself to lazy handling and it certainly has little to give to those who don't believe it.

The above passage from Hebrews has an important lesson to teach, namely, that the truths in the Bible operate in cadres, if you will. There is the foundation (that is, elementary principles as in Heb 5:12) and then there are more mature truths. In my experience, the Truth of the Bible circles back in on itself so that we are constantly understanding better and better things we thought we had already learned as we continue to study the Bible and listen to gifted and prepared teachers. So, even though these are indeed elementary principles, we find them again and again as we move forward in the Truth in greater complexity and giving clearer form to other truths that we learn.

Today, the lesson is on Repentance From Dead Works.

The fact that this expression is in a letter written to the Hebrews makes this an important, even technical term. The context in which we find this expression is very deeply concerned with the obsolescence of the Mosaic Law. This is the letter that most directly addresses the question of the relevance and place of the Mosaic Law in the Christian Faith. And it is also the one where one foundational principle is called "repentance from dead works".

At the moment of belief, when we turn to the Lord Jesus Christ and choose to trust Him, repentance from dead works is part of what we have done. This is why it is called a foundational principle. Part of the meaning of turning to the Lord Jesus is that we have accepted that He is the Only Way that we can be saved, that we can do nothing by ourselves to be saved. That is, only in the Lord Jesus do we have life. Thus, whatever we once hoped would save us is now accepted by us to have no life, no ability in itself to save us.

### **What Dead Works Are**

In the case of the Hebrews to whom this letter was written, they, by believing in the Lord Jesus, had essentially renounced every trust that they had in the Mosaic Law to save them (compare Gal 5:1-4). In other words, the rift between man and God which only spelled Eternal Death for Man was only sealed and repaired in the Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing we could do could seal it or repair it.

In this we begin to appreciate something about the term "dead works". In the footnote in the NIV, the alternative reading offered is "useless rituals". This is very helpful as far as it goes but it may embrace more than rituals. Dead works are essentially works that accomplish nothing despite all the energy that they cost to do. The Mosaic Law was the issue in Hebrews and much of the New Testament and today it is still a big deal in the Church with questions of tithing and Sabbath-keeping among others troubling believers. But there are other dead works which both unbelievers and believers are swindled into pursuing, moreso today than probably at any other point in human history. The many humanistic philosophies of today that glorify "doing good" are examples of these dead works. That is not at all to say that there is anything wrong with giving alms to the poor or starting businesses to solve some problem in the society. These are decent things to do and anyone who believes in the Lord Jesus would applaud them when they are done right. But they are absolutely no substitute for the Death of Jesus Christ on the Cross for us or for our duty to seek the Truth, learn it, believe it, obey it and help fellow believers to do the same. This is where the stumbling block for most people is.

### 1. Why Dead Works Are Dead.

The cost of doing good is high. The energy involved is prohibitive ordinarily. This is why people tend to get upset about being told that there is no value for God in all the good we do on our own. It is also why such people tend to reject God because they think that they can do good without Him.

"Good" actually is defined by God. And it is because of His Perfection that "all our righteousness are as filthy rags" (Is 64:6). So, even though we may feel that because we have spent so much energy and been so meticulous, we are entitled to some praise or other reward from God, it counts for nothing with Him because He is Perfect and demands nothing less than Perfection. While, because we are so weak, we can bear with ourselves and with each other and accept "our best" and "each other's best" as good enough sometimes, God demands no less than Perfection because He is Perfect.

This, in fact, is why He gave the Mosaic Law (Rom 3:20; 5:13, 20): to communicate to human beings that His demands are far more stringent than we could hope to handle. Even the Law itself compromised a lot on God's Standard to accommodate human beings (Matt 19:8; Mk 10:5). Sin, after all, is any act of rebellion against God, not merely anything we are uncomfortable with. Thus, it is God's Own Perfect Demands and Requirements that are at issue here, not our own emotions.

This puts human beings in a very frightening spot. Anyone who truly gets this knows how hopeless the human situation is without God's Help. We have no hope or chance of ever being perfect. We have no possibility of ever pleasing Him by anything we do and so we have only His Judgment and Condemnation to look forward to. That is an unpleasant proposition. And it often leads to human beings making up all

sorts of escapist lies to avoid having to deal with it in the short time that we live in this world. But those who have turned to Christ have already solved this problem. Instead of looking to commend ourselves to God on the basis of some moral victories that we think should impress Him, we have accepted His Own Offer of Justification that is utterly independent of our own energy and strategizing in order to escape His Condemnation.

## 2. Why They Are So Dangerous to Believers.

It is entirely possible for a believer to lose sight of the above as we see in Gal 3:1-7. Satan does not rest easy once we become saved. The addition of every new believer to the Family of God only brings his own execution closer. So, not only does he oppose the coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ of the unbeliever but he does his level best to reverse that faith once it is born in the heart of the unbeliever. This is what he was trying very hard to do with the Roman, Galatian and Hebrew believers to whom Paul had to write such difficult letters. As soon as anyone begins to look for ways outside of the Lord Jesus to recommend themselves to God, they essentially begin to deny any Faith in the Lord Jesus.

In the case of the Galatians, they were being troubled about becoming circumcised because this was the ancient covenant that God made with Abraham to acknowledge him and everyone who who was circumcised in like manner as His people. This was also what was happening to the Romans.

With the Hebrews, because they were already circumcised, it was the general question of continuing Temple worship and rites that was disturbing their walk. Today, as has already been mentioned, the issues include water baptism, tithing, even regular church-going and a large variety of other "rituals" and practices. Satan has no problem using legitimate practices that God once instructed to try to derail what God is doing NOW. That is something that believers often find hard to appreciate. As has already been pointed out, it was God Who commanded circumcision (Gen 17:10-14) but He is God and is at perfect liberty to change His Demands. As it was, the circumcision that He commanded of Abraham here was symbolic. It spoke to a time you to come when those who love Him would be marked with a spiritual circumcision. Likewise, all the sacrifices from the animal skins in the Garden (Gen 3:21) to Abel's sacrifice (Gen 4:4) to all the animal sacrifices of the Mosaic Law were all symbols of the Cross where the Lord Jesus Christ would die in the place of all humans for all human transgressions against God. Once the Lord Jesus Christ came and died for us, all of those symbols didn't need to be carried on anymore. There was no further need for them since all they did was maintain a consciousness of God's Promise of a Way to solve man's terrible problem of sin. Now that He has solved that problem in the Lord Jesus Christ, the reminders of what was to come are no longer necessary. The only reminder necessary now is of what HAS already happened and the Lord gave us the Communion for that (Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:17-20; 1 Cor 11:23-25).

So, what of works? What we are taught in the Bible is to quit pursuing any course of action in the hopes of satisfying God with our efforts independent of what the Lord Jesus has done for us. The simple truth is that it is impossible for us to satisfy God because we all have a sin nature which predisposes us to rebelling against God (Rom 7:5, 8, 14-24; 1 Jn 1:8 ). This is why even the good we believe we do is still

evil in His sight. For one thing, if we obey Him in all points save one, we have still rebelled against Him even though it is in just that one thing (Jas 2:8-11; Rom 2:17-27). Then, again, good actions performed for evil motives are no good in the eyes of the Lord either (Is 29:13; Matt 15:8-9; Mk 7:6; Matt 7:21). All of this is summarized in what Paul says,

Philippians 3:1-11 NASB

*[1]Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.*

*[2]Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision;*

*[3]for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh,*

*[4]although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more:*

*[5]circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee;*

*[6]as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.*

*[7]But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.*

*[8]More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,*

*[9]and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith,*

*[10]that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;*

*[11]in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

## **Conclusion**

Giving up confidence in the flesh is the beginning of faith in the Lord Jesus. To acknowledge both that we cannot save ourselves no matter what we do and that no human agenda or scheme or energy can save us even if it comes from somebody else leaves the Lord Jesus Christ as our only option. And once we begin that way, we must continue that way (Col 2:6).

Therefore, while we must not withhold our hands from charity, good citizenship and other such things, we must never give any of these things greater value than God Himself places on them. They do help to present a good witness for our Faith but it is the Sacrifice of the Lord Jesus that saves us and everything we do must flow from that. But such rituals as circumcision, water baptism (as we will see in another study), Sabbath-keeping and such things as anyone may lay hold upon to say that we are only saved by doing them must be summarily removed from our lives and focus as such. Our primary concern after Salvation must be to grow and progress in the Truth and to help others to do the same since these are the true good works that please the Lord. It is through those things that we earn our eternal rewards to the glory of God.

May the Peace of the Lord Jesus Christ remain with you.