

Gospel Repentance

Part 1 – 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:

Sonny asked that I speak on the essential doctrine of Gospel Repentance. The Greek word that is translated repentance is a word that essentially refers to a change of mind. I know that there are many different ideas that people have about what that change of mind entails. I think most religious folks view repentance as simply a recognition of and / or a confession of their sins before God, along with a sincere resolve to turn away from what they consider to be their sinful thoughts or their sinful conduct. And that sorrowfulness over sins and determination to reform our thoughts and our bad behavior certainly is something that should be done; but it's also something that the natural man (that is one who is still in that initial state of spiritual deadness and blindness) – it's something he or she is quite capable of doing all on their own. Every religion that I know about promotes some sort of reformation of bad character and conduct where it is needed (or as they define it) – but there's only one true religion, so that kind of repentance does not resemble the Gospel Repentance experienced by all who are blessed with true faith in belief of the one Gospel of God's sovereign grace in Christ. The natural man is quite capable of making reformations. But that's not the case with the Gospel Repentance of which I'll be speaking. No – It requires a work of God. Romans 2 tells us that it is the goodness of God that leads to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

Gospel repentance is a change of mind about the Gospel. As I hope to show, in the initial repentance (the Gospel Repentance) that always accompanies the God-given gift of faith that sinners receive in their regeneration (in the new birth and in their conversion) by means of the preached Gospel, we change gospels – our understanding of how God saves sinners changes. And in keeping with that, as I hope to show you in the 2nd part of this series, how in this initial repentance, not only do we change gospels. We also change gods.

The gospel (the body of truth concerning how God saves sinners) – the gospel that we believe – identifies the god which we worship. I often describe this Gospel Repentance as “initial repentance” so as to distinguish it from that ongoing repentance and sorrowfulness over sins that true believers (sinners saved by grace) do in fact continue to experience throughout the remainder of their lives due to the believer’s continuing warfare between the flesh and the Spirit.

Well, is this initial, or Gospel repentance that I’m speaking of truly necessary? Is it in keeping with the theme of this conference – an essential doctrine? Consider that when Christ first began His ministry as recorded in Mark chapter 1, after being baptized by John the Baptist and then tempted of Satan for 40 days in the wilderness, we’re told in Mark 1:14-15 that He then “***came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, ¹⁵And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand:*** <and listen to His very first command as He said...>***repent ye, and believe the gospel.***” And as His wording suggests (and as I hope to show further as we move forward) repentance and belief of the Gospel are inseparable. Where Gospel repentance is absent, so is the genuine belief of God’s one true Gospel. So first, we have our Lord’s own command to repent and believe the gospel.

Secondly, consider with me the context in which repentance is commanded in the latter part of Acts 17, as Paul was addressing the philosophers and others gathered there on Mars Hill. I used this same text when I preached here back in June but today my emphasis is on how the command to repent is connected with God’s standard of judgment. When we get to verse 30 we see that God “***...commandeth all men (not just some, but all men) *every where to repent:****” And then he tells us why repentance is commanded as he continues in verse 31 saying, “***³¹Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.***” How is the fact that we must be found as perfectly righteous as Jesus Christ Himself (that’s the standard of judgment) – why is that the reason that we’re commanded to repent? Well, as suggested by the very context itself, it is because in the initial state of spiritual blindness from which we all must be delivered, when we become interested in our eternal destiny, our initial religious thoughts always will involve having us mistakenly presuming that salvation is conditioned on ourselves, at least in some way and / or to some degree.

And that which proceeds from us sinners, falls far short of the perfect righteousness of God by which we will be judged. Do you have / can you produce a righteousness that equals that of the sinless Son of God?

Our thinking that salvation is in some way conditioned on us is just natural to us. Is it necessary that all men and women experience this Gospel repentance? E.g. – Consider children who grow up under a sound, true Gospel ministry, such as those represented by these Pastors speaking at this conference? Unlike me and my wife, our 3 daughters all were fortunate to have been raised up under such a Gospel ministry. And I remember at some point in time, one of our daughters asking me, how does this initial Gospel repentance apply to folks like her and her sisters who really had little (if any) exposure to the false gospel teaching under which my wife and I were raised. In responding to my daughter, I asked her if she recalled her first thoughts when she perhaps quit daydreaming and started to really listen with a genuine interest in her eternal welfare. I reminded her (and she agreed) that she had been taught aright and believed doctrinal truths such as the doctrines of particular redemption, predestination, election, etc.; but I asked her, “When you first really became interested and decided to get serious about your own eternal welfare, didn’t you ask yourself, “Now what do I need to do to be sure I’m included among God’s elect – that I am one for whom Christ died? Do I need to pray some prayer, or get baptized or what?”

And she got my point and conceded in thinking as much. That’s because that is just natural to fallen sinners in our natural, unregenerate spiritual state. We must be taught otherwise by God. I liken this to the conversion of the Philippian jailer. Wasn’t his first question as recorded there in Acts 16, “*...Sirs, **What must I do to be saved?***” You know, often when a question is asked, there is a false assumption embodied within the question itself. E.g. – Quail hunting has been one of my favorite hobbies. But if you weren’t familiar with the habits of the bobwhite quail, you might ask me, “Randy, what kind of trees do quail nest in?” And I’d answer your question by telling you, “Quail nest on the ground.” In other words, I’d correct the false assumption that was embodied in your question (that they nested in some kind of tree) while still giving you the information you needed.

And when Paul and Silas answered the Philippian jailer by saying, “***Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved,***” they weren’t giving him something to do – and we know that by the Gospel of God’s grace that they believed and preached.

No, they were correcting the false assumption embodied in the question, by telling him that instead of it being something he needed to do to be saved, he would need (by God's grace) to instead look to the doing and dying of another – the Lord Jesus Christ and thereby he would give evidence of being among the saved. It's important that we don't confuse the cause with the effect. If our conversion and acceptance before God is imagined to be a product of something that proceeds from us (us far-from-perfect sinners), something we do, some choice or decision we make, etc.; then, that would have us depending upon something that falls far short of the perfect righteousness of God in Christ by which we all shall be judged. So, for that reason, God calls on all men everywhere to repent. Gospel repentance is absolutely necessary – it is essential!

In our initial, spiritually dead state, we are ignorant of (and have yet to submit to) this standard by which all are judged – the perfect, justice-satisfying merits of the obedience unto death of the Lord Jesus Christ (that's His righteousness). And this ignorance or failure to submit to His righteousness is because in that natural state (before we are given spiritual life) as we're told in I Cor. 2:14, ***“...the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”*** It requires a work of God the Holy Spirit.

As I think back on my own experience, for years I was steeped in religion while never hearing of the need for this righteousness by which God says we all shall be judged. I was zealous and sincere in my religion, but I was sincerely wrong. As I mentioned to you when I was here back in June, Why, I'd never even heard the term, “imputed righteousness.” We are commanded to repent because God's righteousness is His standard of judgment, and because it's contrary to what we all naturally and initially presume. I.e. – We are to repent (turn away from and reject) the mistaken (but not just mistaken – but evil), natural notions embodied in (not our immoral thoughts) but in our religious thoughts if and when we become interested in religion – notions we all initially entertain as spiritually dead sinners – that presumption that something other than (or in addition to) the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed (or charged to our account) could find us as acceptable / justified / forgiven of our sins before a holy and just God.

You know, over the years, I find from having talked with folks who seem indifferent or show little to no interest in religion, that even they too often come to a false sense of peace about their destiny – often imagining that since everybody considers so-and-so to be saved (and I know I’m just as good (if not a better) person morally as he or she is), then I’m okay – it’ll all work out for me so I can just put that concern to rest. Well – that too describes the religious thoughts of which God commands sinners to repent, because of their natural ignorance of His standard of judgment. Because it’s not how you measure up to so and so – to some other sinner – it’s how you measure up to the perfect righteousness of God in Christ.

A. Just as God commands all to repent in Acts 17:30, in 2 Peter 3:9 we’re told it is God’s will (not for all men everywhere) but for all of His “beloved” (as His elect children are called in verse 8) to repent as it goes on to say in verse 9, ***“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”*** So, (1) God commands all to this Gospel repentance and (2) it is God’s will that all of His chosen children in Christ will repent. And this, God’s will that His elect all come to repentance, cannot (and will not) be thwarted. God’s will shall be done! As He says in Isaiah 46:10, ***“My counsel <i.e. – His purpose / His will> shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:”*** His calling is irresistible. So, if you’re one of God’s elect – His will that you come to repentance will take place – and that without fail.

So, I want you to consider with me these 3 facts: (1) God-given faith is the revelation of this very righteousness of God (Romans 1:16-17) – it being the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth...because therein is the righteousness of God revealed. And (2) that it is ***“...with the heart man believeth unto righteousness;...”*** (Rom. 10:10); And (3) we’re commanded to repent because we’ve been ignorant of the fact that God’s perfect righteousness is His standard of judgment; Well – then you can see that this repentance that God commands is inseparable (or always accompanies) the genuine gift of faith whereby sinners believe and embrace God’s Gospel – the Gospel wherein His righteousness is revealed – righteousness being the common component to both faith and repentance. So, where you find true God-given faith, you also always will find this God-given gift of Gospel repentance.

As you know, I have had the benefit of sitting under the ministry of Pastor Bill Parker in Albany, Georgia for many years.

And for those of you have heard Bill preach over some of those years, you have probably heard him refer to this initial repentance with this phrase – referring to it as “repentance from dead works and former idolatry.” And those are indeed biblical descriptions of this initial Gospel repentance – descriptions that we will examine further.

II. Repentance common to all who are saved: I do believe it’s appropriate to lump these two descriptions together in this phrase given that repentance from dead works and repentance from idolatry are not referring to two separate experiences. Rather, that simply describes two aspects of the one common initial repentance experienced by all who are saved. By faith, we come to Christ (as His Person and work are set forth in the Gospel of God’s grace) for all salvation – the Christ whereby we know the one living and true God. (Quote John 17:3). In Christ dwells all the fulness of the God-head bodily (Col. 2:9). So as faith is turning to God through Christ our Savior, by definition, this also involves a turning away (a repentance) from that which we previously (and naturally, but mistakenly and sinfully) believed about how God saves sinners. You know this concept of considering religious thoughts to be sinful or evil is really foreign to most of the religious folks I know; however, in Gospel Repentance, that is exactly what the sinner is brought to see. And what we believe about how God saves sinners, our gospel, identifies the god we worship as to whether it is the true God of the Bible or a false god, an idol. The truth is you don’t change gospels (not in coming to believe the one true Gospel) without also changing gods.

So, in this 2-part series, we will examine these 2 descriptions of the initial repentance that accompanies God-given faith for all those who believe. In this, the 1st part of this series, I want to major on the aspect of Gospel repentance as it is biblically defined as being a “repentance from dead works.”

III. Repentance from Dead Works:

A. What are dead works? Put simply, it’s any work done by the sinner that is imagined to have earned him or her something before God, gained God’s favor and /or removed His wrath. When a sinner bases their hope on anything other than (or in addition to) Christ and His righteousness imputed, then whatever it is that is imagined to be that difference-maker (or play some causal role in their being saved), that is a “dead” work. “Dead works” refers to any efforts of our own that we imagine contributes toward our attaining or maintaining salvation’s benefits –

...anything that proceeds from us sinners that we believe is making some difference in our being counted among those who will go to heaven.

And calling them “dead works” seems logical when you consider that those who are spiritually “dead” are the ones that perform them. Likewise, it makes sense because “dead works” are fruitless (like a fruit tree that has died) in that they do not accomplish what they were presumed to be able to accomplish (one’s own salvation). And then lastly, because the ultimate end of those who never repent from dead works is eternal death. **“...except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”** (Lk. 13:3 and 5).

All without exception (including those who are eventually saved) start out this life’s journey, physically born into this world as spiritually dead sinners. As we’re told concerning true believers, **“You hath he quickened <made spiritually alive> who were dead in trespasses and sin.”** And in that unregenerate state, any and all of our works that are imagined to contribute in some way to our being saved are “dead works” (or to use another scriptural description, “fruit unto death”).

We see that terminology used by Paul in Romans 7:5 as he wrote, **“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 spiritually blind (but religious) sinners were moved or motivated to do in order to satisfy what we thought was required for us to be saved – akin to our law-keeping if you would> did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death.”** And that “fruit unto death” is the same as “dead works.”

When you consider that among the multitude of the different religions and religious sects throughout the world, that despite the diversity of religious thoughts found among them, they all actually fall under one of 2 categories – (1) the one true religion of salvation by God’s sovereign grace (salvation conditioned on Christ alone) or (2) despite their many differences, they always involve imaging that their salvation (or their being blessed by their concept of deity), is by their works (salvation or their god’s blessing upon them being conditioned in some way or to some degree on the sinner). In light of that fact, it makes perfect sense why God’s command to repent of dead works is given to all men everywhere, because we all start out in that 2nd group – because the religion of salvation (or being blessed) by our works is the 1st religious inclination of all spiritually blind, spiritually dead sinners who were ever born into this world.

B. Hebrews 6:1: Now look with me at Hebrews 6 where my primary text for this session is taken. Leading up to this chapter, at the close of chapter 5, we're told that they were dull of hearing and in elaborating 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 he continues and then when we get to Hebrews 6:1 we read, ***"Therefore 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,"*** Now what I want you to notice here is that from this context, repentance from dead works and faith toward God are set forth as 1) the first principles of the oracles of God and 2) foundational principles of the doctrine of Christ. Foundational – If it's foundational, that means it is a vital, critical basic building block, fundamental (or essential) to the doctrine of Christ. The doctrine of Christ is the vital truth of God's Gospel that is believed upon by all those who are saved.

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."*** So, from Hebrews 6:1 we know that repentance from dead works is an identifying characteristic (along with God-given faith) of all believers as it is said to be foundational to the vital doctrine of Christ. And so, it is vital or essential that sinners come to understand and experience this repentance from dead works. Repentance from dead works and former idolatry give the evidence that our accompanying faith is true, genuine, God-given faith.

C. Hebrews 9:14: Further over in the book of Hebrews, in chapter 9, we have a comparison being made between (1) the offering of animal sacrifices (as the Jews were commanded to do 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. Beginning in Hebrews 9:13 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?"***

It's conveyed here "How much more" the spiritual application by the eternal Holy Spirit of the shed blood of the sinless, spotless, Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, have its sure fruit and effect in purging of the conscience from "dead works" – the consciences of all those for whom that blood was shed.

In Gospel repentance, we recognize the evil of ever having esteemed that which proceeds from me, the sinner, (e.g. – my decision, my free-will choice, my sincere religious interest, my reformation of character, etc. – anything that proceeds from me, the sinner) – we see the evil of having dared to have esteemed that work that proceeds from us sinners as being the real difference-maker, the crowning event, over and above / in opposition to / in rivalry with what it actually takes for a sinner to be reconciled before God – the precious shed blood of the Son of God.

Notice from this passage that this purging of our conscience from dead works, is a blood-work. In man's natural state, he does not experience this repentance. But all for whom Christ died, shall in time (in the day of His power) be given spiritual life for just as the sins of God's elect imputed to Christ demanded that He die before the strict justice of God, the merit of His perfect obedience unto death – His righteousness – demanded He come out of that grave and live. Sin demands death. Righteousness demands life. And the imputation of that righteousness to everyone for whom He died, demands that they likewise shall live – receive both spiritual life in their respective lifetimes and ultimately eternal life in heaven's glory. Christ's obedience unto death as the Surety and Substitute of God's elect is the sure and certain reason He arose from the grave. God's justice was satisfied! And those for whom He died being raised in spiritual life and ultimately to heaven's glory is the sure and certain effect of His justice-satisfying righteousness wrought out on their behalf and having been imputed to them – and that for each and every one for whom He died – all whose sins were imputed to Him that He might pay their sin debt. Where the debt has been remitted or paid in full before our holy and just God, the debt must be forgiven.

Gospel repentance is a blood-bought gift. It (like faith) is the certain fruit and effect of Christ's shed blood, His redemptive work, that (at God's appointed time) 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 aimed at saving ourselves (or even contributing to our being saved) as dead works, with no merit to be found in them whatsoever, and so, we repent.

The conscience refers to our seat of judgment. And as a fruit of Christ's shed blood for the sinner, the conscience is purged from dead works – purged (cleaned out) – in other words there is a radical change of mind in how we judge those works that proceeded from us. And notice the definite connection between (1) the purging of the conscience from dead works and (2) serving the living God.

From this 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 one true and living God – as opposed to the false dead god (an idol) we naturally worshipped in our spiritual ignorance.

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 mercy and grace to provide a perfect righteousness that we couldn't provide for ourselves – a perfect righteousness that is imputed to each of God's dear children whereby they are found accepted in God's sight, accepted in their beloved Savior!

So, to recap, so far, 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 repentance is a blood work – a direct and sure fruit and effect of Christ's accomplishment for each and every one for whom He died.
3. And so, one who repents of dead works is one whose conscience has been purged from dead works so as to serve the one true and living God whereby they repent of before having worshipped a false and dead god – no god at all, an idol.

So, in part 2, my next session, I'll pick up from here and address further this 2nd aspect of this initial Gospel Repentance as it is biblically described as repentance from idolatry.

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.