



The Lost Foundations – Repentance from Dead Works

Introduction

Our search for the lost foundations takes us now to the elementary principles of Christ. You may be thinking, “Elementary principles? Why should we go there? Haven’t we grown beyond the elementary? Surely we know more now about Christ’s principles than we ever have.”

Check for yourself. The following passage contains six elementary and foundational principles. Which do you understand, believe and practice in your life?

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.
Hebrews 6:1-2

See what I mean? Unless you have been to Bible College, I am pretty sure there are at least a couple of these elementary principles that you have not been taught, much less encouraged to incorporate into your faith walk. Somehow, they have been lost to the church, in our day.

Furthermore, I suspect that what we do know, we do not know completely. Take “repentance from dead works” for example. We have all been taught about repentance from sin (or sins, or “the sin”); but, what is this matter of “dead works”? Are dead works and sin the same thing? Are you sure?

What about “repentance”? What does it really mean to repent? Does it mean “to turn” or “make an about-face”, as so many have taught? Is that its full meaning? Furthermore, do you know how repentance is accomplished?

Let me suggest that it is very important to know the answers to these questions. It is necessary that we have a love of the truth here. The consequences are more significant than we may imagine.

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Hebrews 5:12-14

The writer of Hebrews encourages the church to move on to more advanced principles (i.e., solid food). It is this solid food that makes us skilled in the word of righteousness; to be a teacher of God’s word, and a discernor of good and evil. This may be the greatest need in the church today; so let’s be diligent to rediscover what has been lost, so that we might move on to meatier truth.

One final introductory comment: Since these are elementary principles, we will search them out in an elementary way. Guard yourself against presumption. Ask the Lord and the Spirit to reveal the fullness of the truth found in this foundation. Allow the word of God to have its full effect.

Definitions

Through many years of searching out the matter of Biblical foundation and mystery, I have learned that the best place to start is inevitably the definition of terms. Many times, I have discovered that the full meaning of a word is more than – even very different from – what I had been taught.

When I was young in the faith, I assumed that my teachers knew what they were talking about. I was a lazy student of the Scriptures. We all need to be more careful in this regard; particularly with the more significant words of our faith.

I suspect this lack of understanding is a root cause of our losing this and other foundations. “Repentance from dead works” is a great example. As we will see, the wrong understanding will lead to believing the wrong thing – a lie, or something short of the truth. We subsequently live out of the lie (or less than truth) that we believe. Ironically, this can lead us directly to dead works.

Repentance (*metanoia*) – A change of mind, as it appears to one who repents, of a purpose he has formed or of something he has done; especially the change of mind of those who have begun to abhor their errors and misdeeds, and have determined to enter upon a better course of life, so that it embraces both a recognition of sin and sorrow for it and hearty amendment, the tokens and effect of which are good deeds. *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*

There are a few interesting points to draw from this definition:

1. It has been popular to teach that repentance is a turning from evil to good; or from sin to God. This is not wrong; but it is not exactly right, either. Repentance is “a change of mind”. This makes the object of repentance clear; it is the mind that must be changed.
2. Repentance applies to more than our actions (i.e., “something he has done”). It also encompasses purposes that we have formed. Purpose is a function of the heart. Therefore, a change of mind affects the function of our heart.
3. The effect of repentance is good deeds. This makes sense in light of the Hebrews 6 text; and a clue to the meaning of “dead works”.

Dead (*nekros*) – Properly: One that has breathed his last, lifeless; deceased, departed, one whose soul is in heaven or hell; destitute of life, without life, inanimate. Metaphorically: Spiritually dead; destitute of a life that recognizes and is devoted to God, because given up to trespasses and sins; inactive as respects doing right; destitute of force or power, inactive, inoperative. *Outline of Biblical Usage, BlueLetterBible.org*

Work (*ergon*) – Business, employment, that which any one is occupied; that which one undertakes to do, enterprise, undertaking; any product whatever, anything accomplished by hand, art, industry, or mind; an act, deed, thing done: the idea of working is emphasized in opposition to that which is less than work. *Outline of Biblical Usage, BlueLetterBible.org*

Drawing from these definitions, we discover that “dead work” is any act, deed or accomplishment that lacks life and is, consequently, “inactive as respects doing right”. As we will see, these definitions help us greatly in our understanding of the work that is dead; including the impact it can have in our lives.

Two Opposing Conditions

Changing our mind (i.e., repentance) suggests two conditions: The old state of our mind and the new state. These states are opposed to one another.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Romans 8:5-8

Our minds can be set on the flesh – leading to death (the natural result of our being at enmity with God); or, on the Spirit, leading to life and peace. This is a willful choice we make: choosing how we will live.

For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. Romans 8:13

There are four significant points to make here:

1. The Lord's encouragement here (Romans 8:5-13) is for something far beyond our sin. His concern is for our state of being – the way we think, walk and live. This is one of those significant understandings that have been lost to the church. Repentance is about much more than “turning away from our sin”.
2. The deeds of the body – that lead to death – are what the writer of Hebrews refers to as “dead works”; works of the flesh that not only are dead, but also produce death. Though inanimate, dead works are a weight and an entanglement with the things of this world.
3. If we choose to set our mind on the flesh (and its dead works), spiritual death is inevitable. No action is required. In contrast, setting our mind on the Spirit leads to an action; namely, putting the deeds of the body (dead works) to death.
4. The Holy Spirit plays a prominent role in this endeavor (more on this later). This gives us great hope for our repentance to the state of mind that leads to life, and produces that which pleases God (v. 8).

It is important to understand – and believe – that there is no equilibrium or compromise between these two states of mind. They are forces vying for our heart, soul and strength.

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. Galatians 5:16-17

The Spirit of God and the flesh of man have deep desires (lusts) against each other. Spiritual thinking and fleshly thinking are passionately adversarial (contrary) toward one another. To walk with one is to walk away from the other. The dead works of the flesh are an evil force that draws its victims away from life in the Spirit. Fortunately, the Spirit has other plans for the children of God.

The New State of Mind

As we alluded to earlier, the new, Spirit-empowered state of mind is also characterized by a type of work; work that is pleasing to God. This work is work of a different, virtuous and praiseworthy kind. Jesus, Paul and others call them “good works”; and there is more to them than most have considered or been taught.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:16

God has created us to walk in the good works that will bring Him glory. These are not normal works; but works that others see and come away thinking, “Isn't God awesome!”

These are, in fact, God's works. They must be for Him to receive the glory from them; for He would not steal glory from His children. They are the working of His mighty power in and through the followers of Jesus Christ.

... for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Philippians 2:13

...being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ... Philippians 1:6

Not only has God created us for the good works that will glorify Him, but He is working in us to prepare us for that work. It is an ongoing work that He has promised to complete; continually applying His workmanship.

And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work. 2Corinthians 9:8

He will not leave us lacking for the work we are to walk in.

... that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God... Colossians 1:10

His work in us results in fruitfulness (i.e., the abiding branch) that pleases Him and accompanies our increased intimacy with Him. This intimacy – our knowing Him – is eternal life.

And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. John 17:3

The good works of God are a force for life. They stand opposed to the deadly force of dead works. And so now that we understand the gravity of the situation, let us turn our attention to the repentance required for the life that we have been given.

The Mind of Christ

There are times when the elementary transitions to mystery; when the milk becomes meat. This is, for me, one of the more exciting things about the elementary principles; they are a door to the mysteries of the kingdom of God.

My intention is to stay on the elementary side of the six Hebrews principles. However, some things must be shared; if only to encourage you in the wonders of God's thoughts and ways. Here we have a case in point.

For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. ...But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. ...But we have the mind of Christ. 1Corinthians 2:11-16

What was it that enabled Jesus Christ – the Son of Man – to only do the works that pleased His Father in heaven? He had received the Spirit who is from God; the Spirit who knows the things of God. He knew the mind of God because He had set His mind on the things of the Spirit. This is His mind; and it is the mind that we have been given.

However – and this is a big “however”: What has been given must be received (v. 12). Furthermore, there is a “letting” that must occur.

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus... Philipians 2:5

To “let” and “receive” speak of a process; a process that requires our participation. Thankfully, it is not a process for which we are responsible. As we have already discovered, it is a process of God's good work. It is a work of the Holy Spirit – our Transformer.

The Holy Spirit's Work

The process of transformation is not complicated. However, only those who are followers of Jesus Christ have any hope of understanding it. So, let's stop now and ask the Father for revelation and understanding; that we might truly repent from dead works.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to

this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Romans 12:1-2

The first step in our repentance is presenting our bodies to God. These are bodies that have put on Christ, through belief and baptism (Galatians 3:27). This sacrifice is accompanied by a decision and commitment: “do not be conformed to this world”.

Based on simple observation, this is a decision and commitment that many in the church have missed. It is a key step in counting the cost of following Jesus Christ. It is important to emphasize that this not an optional step; but one that directly affects our repentance.

The works of the flesh are the things of this world; and they stand passionately opposed to the mind of Christ. Conformity to the world for the Christian is nothing short of double-mindedness; an incredible handicap to our repentance from dead works.

Step two is the transformation that comes with the renewing of our minds. This is the Holy Spirit’s work.

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. 2Corinthians 3:18

It is the Spirit’s work to renew our minds and transform us into the image of the glory of the Lord. Our transformation into the same image includes the renewing of our minds towards, or into, the mind of Christ.

For this process to be effective, we must behold the glory of the Lord. In other words, He must manifest Himself to us. How does this happen?

He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him. John 14:21

A critical step in our repentance from dead works is our keeping of the commandments of Jesus Christ. It is an action of love that results in Him manifesting Himself to us. This is one of those “AHA!!” discoveries: Keeping the commandments of the Lord are good works that stand opposed to the dead works of our flesh.

Finally, it is important to understand that the process of our transformation is iterative (i.e., from glory to glory). As Paul confessed:

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Philippians 3:12

As we press on to perfection – our final glorification – we are to lay hold of that which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of us – including His mind.

Our Participation through the Power of *Logizomai*

Laying hold of the mind of Christ is central to our repentance from dead works; and it is not a mystery. In fact, there is something very practical that we can do to participate with the Holy Spirit in this renewal process.

God created a word to describe that practical activity: *Logizomai*. Relatively speaking, *logizomai* is an important word in Scripture; appearing 41 times in the New Testament. Here are a few examples:

Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:11

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. Romans 8:18

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. 1Corinthians 13:11

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. Philippians 4:8

Logizomai is an accounting term; meaning to record something in a journal, or balance the books. In the spiritual context, it is the process of making true for me what God says is true – balancing my mind with His. It is laying hold of the mind of Christ.

Before we go on, it should be noted that reckoning is not a positive reinforcement technique. It is more than the power of positive thinking; because the power is not in our thinking, but in the thing we are thinking about: The thoughts and ways of God; contained in His word.

As we live according to the mind of Christ, the word of God comes to us – in increasingly greater measure.

So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. Romans 10:17

For those that can hear, the word of God becomes faith; a thing of the heart.

For with the heart one believes unto righteousness... Romans 10:10

By God's grace, we believe unto righteousness. Though many stop here (because they are taught to), this is not the end of the process.

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. James 2:14-26 (select verses)

The penalty of dead faith is devastating to the individual that carries it around. To God, it is a terrible stench (think road kill). Thankfully, God has given us all we need for godliness and abundant living. We don't have to live our lives in deception, forgetfulness and dead faith. God has made a way!

God has given us a way out of this devastating predicament. He has given us a key that bridges the gap from hearing to doing; from the hearing of faith to the work of faith; and from deception and forgetfulness to good work. He has given us the power of *logizomai*.

So you see, *logizomai* is effectual for our repentance in two ways. First, it opens a door to our hearts for the word of God. Once that word becomes faith, *logizomai* is used by the Holy Spirit to renew our minds for action in accordance with our new found faith. Our newly empowered mind directs the body into the good works that glorify our Father in heaven.

Works without Faith are Also Dead

Not only are there good works that die prematurely – at the hands of dead faith; but there are works that are dead for lack of faith. Let me say that again: Dead works are also a product of our lack of faith.

Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin. Romans 14:22-23.

If “whatever is not from faith is sin” and “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”, we can conclude that sin is work done outside of without the word of God.

It is important to note that the Greek word for “word” in Romans 10:17 is *rhema*: that which is or has been uttered by the living voice, thing spoken (Thayer’s Lexicon). One of the chief ways we practice dead works is taking it upon ourselves to do work that we have not been commanded to do. Jesus makes this tragically clear at the end of the Sermon on the Mount.

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” Matthew 7: 21-23

Even the greatest works or prophecy, deliverance and wonders will lead to our total separation from the Lord – the loss of eternal life (John 17:3). Works without faith are not only dead – they also lead to death.

Conclusion

The study of repentance from dead works has led me to believe that dead works are sin; and most of our sin is simply the works that are done outside of the faith that comes from the word of God. Furthermore, dead works are not just “without life”. There is a force to them that creates death.

It is sobering to realize that even the seemingly good, better and greater works that we do could be leading us into spiritual death. Many firmly believe this is not possible. They have exchange the truth for a lie. Why? Because it is easier to sell repentance as a turning from sin, rather than a change in the way we think, walk and live.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we must develop a greater appreciation for the destructive impact work without faith can have on our eternal future. We must develop a new and healthy fear of dead works; and a renewed desire to repent – and keep on repenting – from them.

Application

This principle is elementary. It is not hard to understand. That does not mean that it is easy to apply in our lives. That is one very big reason why we need each other.

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

The Day is approaching!! Find your platoon – those that will exhort you in preparation for the events leading up to that Day. Speak the truth in love.

For Christian Leaders this is particularly important. Repentance is the first step in every Christians’ following after Jesus Christ. You have been strategically positioned. You are to take the lead in the “consider one another”, “assembling of ourselves together”, and “exhorting one another” commands. There is no time like the present to get on with the good work you have been created to walk in.

Assignment

1. Invest the time necessary to learn the voice of God. Different people hear Him in different ways.
2. Begin the process of transformation: Change your mind about the dangers of conforming to the world; and join the Holy Spirit in the work He is doing to renew your mind.
3. Go back and *logizomai* the truths of this foundation for yourself and those in your spheres of influence.

Recommended Reading

The following are some of my favorite books on this subject. Most can be found at your local Christian book store, or at one of the many online distributors.

They Found the Secret; V. Raymond Edman

The Word and Power Church; Doug Banister

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Humbly Yours and Forever His,

Rob