

# Repentance From Dead Works

by Harry Ironside

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*Harry Ironside's sermon emphasizes the necessity of repentance from dead works and the centrality of faith in Christ for salvation.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 64:6, Jeremiah 17:9, John 14:6, Acts 24:15, Romans 3:19-20, Romans 10:3, Galatians 3:11, Philippians 3:4-6, Hebrews 6:1, Hebrews 9:13

**Topics:** "Repentance", "Faith in Christ"

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## Description

Harry Ironside emphasizes the critical nature of 'repentance from dead works' in the Christian faith, contrasting it with the futile attempts of legalism to achieve righteousness. He explains that dead works refer to the efforts of individuals to earn salvation through their own actions, which are ultimately ineffective due to humanity's sinful nature. Ironside highlights that true repentance involves a complete change of mind, turning away from self-reliance and towards faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. He illustrates this with biblical examples and stresses that salvation has always been through faith, not works, as seen in the lives of figures like Abraham and David. The sermon concludes with the assurance that true life and good works flow from a relationship with Christ, not from human effort.

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## Transcript

In the remarkably difficult passage warning against apostasy, in the sixth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, there is an expression that may well claim our serious attention. In setting forth the "word of the beginning of Christ" (note the marginal reading), which we are exhorted to leave in order to press on to the full revelation of the Gospel, which is denominated "perfection," in contrast to the Law, which made nothing perfect, we find the couplet, "of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God" (v. 1). Because we are exhorted not to lay again this foundation, we are not to suppose that we are called upon to ignore the earlier principles in order to enhance the importance of the new. God's truth has been imparted to man gradually, but no later truth demands the spurning of that which has gone before.

By the term "the word of the beginning of Christ" I understand the testimony of the Law and the Prophets right on through the ministry of the last of them all, John the Baptist, and the added instruction of our Lord Himself in the days of His flesh. All this constitutes the foundation upon which the later revelation rests. It is noticeable that this foundation is given in three couplets. In addition to the one already mentioned, and which I propose to deal with at some length, we have "a doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands," and in the third place, "of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment." All of these six principles

were dealt with in, and formed part of, the earlier messages of God to His people Israel and to the world at large.

There is no doctrine of baptisms, or washings, in the Christian system. The reference is to Jewish ceremonial washings which sanctified to the purifying of the flesh. The laying on of hands refers not to ministerial ordination, as some have imagined, but to the laying on of hands upon the sacrificial victims, which identified the offerer with his offering, thus typifying the believer laying hold in faith upon the finished work of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. This has been beautifully expressed by Isaac Watts when he wrote:

"My faith would lay her hand

On that blest head of Thine,

While like a penitent I stand

And there confess my sin."

The doctrine of the resurrection of the dead and of eternal judgment runs all through Scripture. Paul refers to it as part of the hope of Israel, for believing which he stood condemned (Acts 24:15). It is almost needless to remind my reader, if instructed in Christian truth, that we have an interesting advance upon this, however, both in the four Gospels and in Paul's Epistles; for there we learn of resurrection from the dead, the first resurrection unto life, as distinguished from a second resurrection unto judgment.

But now we turn to consider the first pair of doctrines in this double trilogy referred to. Here we note the order as elsewhere in Scripture, repentance first, then faith. We have already seen that Paul preached "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." This is the full-orbed Christian message. In Hebrews it is repentance from, not toward, something. From what? From that in which every legalist puts all his confidence -- dead works.

In Scripture we have three kinds of works: good works, evil works, and dead works. Good works are the fruit of the new life, and in our dispensation of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Of all who are unsaved we read, "There is none that doeth good, no, not one." Disciples of Christ, on the other hand, are exhorted so to walk and speak that men may see their good works and glorify their Father which is in heaven. We are "created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." Well has the hymn writer declared:

"I would not work my soul to save,

That work my Lord has done;

But I would work like any slave

For love of God's dear Son."

Good works are life works -- inwrought by the Lord Himself, who works in us -- both the willing and the doing of His good pleasure. Evil works are the wicked ways of the unregenerate man. They are but the manifestation in outward behavior of the evil nature that is estranged from God and can only bring forth bad fruit. The world hated Jesus because He testified of it that its works were evil. He showed the source of all this to be the heart, out of which sin proceeds as foul water from a polluted fountain. Good

resolutions, attempted reformation, pious intentions, are alike powerless to change this. The prophet asks: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil" (Jer. 13:23). The trouble is too deep seated for human effort to change it. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately [or, incurably] wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9). Until the sinner receives a new heart his works can only be evil continually.

But in our text we read of "dead works." What is meant by this expression, so strange to our ordinary way of thinking and speaking? Dead works are law works. They are the vain efforts of the natural man to win God's salvation by obedience to law, whether human or divine. But because the man himself is viewed by God as dead in trespasses and in sins, his attempts to produce a righteousness suitable to merit eternal life and salvation are likewise looked upon as dead works. When God gave the Law He proclaimed, "The man which doeth those things shall live by them." But no man was ever found who could keep this holy Law, and the penalty for violation of its precepts was death. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." This sentence was passed upon all men. "Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:19-20).

This is what God Himself has declared, but few there are who accept it as true. "They being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God" (Rom. 10:3). This was true of Israel after the flesh. It is just as true of millions of Gentiles, who, ignoring the solemn testimony of God's Word regarding man's utterly lost condition, still persist in trying to work out a righteousness of their own, deceived by the Adversary into believing that they can in some way placate an offended God and put Him in their debt so that they can earn His salvation. Isaiah tells us that "we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away" (Isa. 64:6). It is just this attempt to work out a human, legal righteousness that God's Word dominates "dead works."

What then is meant by "repentance from dead works"? It is a complete change of mind, whereby the convicted sinner gives up all thought of being able to propitiate God by effort of his own and acknowledges that he is as bad as the Word has declared him to be. He turns right about face. Instead of relying on his own fancied merits he turns to the Lord for deliverance and seeks for mercy through the Saviour God has provided.

In Old Testament times the legal code with its attendant forms and ceremonies was given, not as a means of justifying righteousness, but as a test of obedience. It was as true then as now that the righteous requirement of the Law was only fulfilled (and that of course but in measure) in those who were already regenerated. God has never had two ways of saving people, but different stewardships, or dispensations, have been committed to His people as standards of living, in the various ages. No one was ever saved by law-keeping or by sacrificial observances. To trust in these things would never avail. Not sacrifices, nor offerings, but a broken and a contrite heart, was acceptable to God. All outward forms or legal efforts, apart from faith, were but dead works, from which the prophets were constantly calling upon men to repent.

A personal experience may make this clear and help to impress it upon the reader's mind. On one occasion, upon being asked to preach in a country church, I dropped into a Bible class conducted by a kindly, earnest man, whose knowledge of Scripture, however, was distressingly limited. In the course of

the discussion he put the question, "How were people saved before Jesus came into the world to die for our sins and to redeem us to God?" Timidly, a lady replied, "By keeping the law of Moses." "Exactly," said the teacher. "If they kept the commandments they received eternal life."

No one demurring, I felt impelled to ask, "What, then, do you make of Galatians 3:11, 'But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them'? And again in verse 21 of the same chapter we are told, 'If there had been a law given which could have given life verily righteousness should have been by the law.' Do not these passages, to which many more might be added, show clearly that one must have divine life before he can do what the Law commands, and that no one was ever justified by keeping it?"

For a moment the leader seemed confused, then he responded graciously, "I think our visitor is right. We had overlooked these passages. Who else can suggest a way whereby people could be saved before Christ came?" Another ventured to inquire, "Would it not be by animal sacrifices? If they broke the Law, did they not make an atonement for their offense by bringing a sin-offering?" This quite satisfied the teacher. "I think that makes it perfectly plain, does it not?" he declared.

But the visitor had to object again, "What do you understand by the solemn words of Hebrews 10:4, 'For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins'?" Candidly he confessed, "That is a difficulty. What, then, would you say, sir?"

In reply I endeavored to show that in all ages men were saved when they turned to God as repentant sinners and believed His testimony. Of this Abraham is the outstanding example. He believed in the Lord and He counted it unto him for righteousness. And David shows that forgiveness was granted and sin covered when one owned his guilt before God and trusted His grace, as set forth in Psalm 32. They were saved as truly as we are by the atoning work of Christ Jesus, only they looked forward to the cross while we look backward to it. Romans 3:24-26 makes this very plain: "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus."

I pointed out, what every careful student of Scripture knows, that the expression used in verse 25, "sins that are past," refers not to our past sins prior to our conversion, but to sins committed by believers in past ages, before Christ died to put them away. The clause might be rendered 'to declare his righteousness in the pretermission of sins.' Then in the next verse comes the present application of the work of the cross, "To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness," in justifying ungodly sinners through faith in Jesus.

It was most interesting to see how eagerly that little company drank in the truth and with what joy they seemed to apprehend it.

Dead works, then, are works of the flesh, but works performed with intent to earn God's salvation. Of old it might be the effort to keep implicitly the Ten Commandments and to fulfill all the requirements of the ceremonial law. But if the man himself had no life, his works were all dead and could not be accepted of God. In fact, he needed to repent from such dead works, to recognize the folly of trying to win salvation by deeds of the Law. From all such dead works he needed cleansing, as truly as from his manifold iniquities. And all this has been provided in the cross. 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 [Note this,

for it was as far as the Law could go. It gave outward cleansing not inward]: 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?"

This is the Gospel revealed to Saul of Tarsus and which changed him into Paul the Apostle. His "dead works" are enumerated in Philippians 3:4-6: "Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." But from these he repented when he turned from self to Christ, and, casting away all confidence in legal righteousness, he could exclaim: "But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith."

When Moody and Sankey were having their stirring evangelistic campaigns in England Mr. Sankey used the hymn a great deal which is an answer to the question "What must I do to be saved?"

"Nothing either great or small,

Nothing, sinner, no;

Jesus died and did it all

Long, long ago.

"When He from His lofty throne,

Stooped to do and die,

Everything was fully done,

Harken to His cry--

"It is finished!" yes, indeed,

Finished every jot,

Sinner, this is all you need,

Tell me, is it not?

"Till to Jesus' work you cling

By a simple faith,

Doing is a deadly thing,

Doing ends in death.

"Cast your deadly doing down,

Down at Jesus' feet.

Stand in Him, in Him alone,

Gloriously complete."

James Anthony Froude, the noted essayist, declared this hymn to be "absolutely immoral." To him it left no place for ethical behavior in the plan of salvation. But he was wrong. It is when men repent from dead works and put their faith in God, resting in the redemptive work of His blessed Son, that they really begin to live unto Him and to manifest in their ways the good works which are the natural result of the impartation of a new nature received when they are born from above and so made members of that new creation of which the Risen Christ is the Head.

"'What must I do?' has oft been asked

Eternal life to gain;

Man anxious seems for any task

If this he may obtain.

"But all the doing has been done,

As God has clearly shown,

When by the offering of His Son,

His purpose He made known.

"He laid on Him the sinner's guilt

When came the appointed day.

And by that blood on Calvary spilt

Takes all our guilt away."

Happy is the man who sees the end of all flesh in the cross of Christ, and, giving up all pretension to human merit, turns from dead works of every kind and description and rests solely upon the finished work of Jesus. "'It is finished'," repeated a dying saint, and then added, "Upon that I hang my eternity."

Repentance from dead works," then, implies the giving up of all confidence in the flesh, the recognition that I am not able to do one thing to retrieve my fallen estate. As a dead sinner I cannot do one thing to merit the divine favor. My prayers, my tears, my charity, my religiousness, all count for nothing, so far as earning salvation is concerned. I am lost and need a Saviour. I am sick and need a Physician. I am bankrupt and need a Kinsman-Redeemer. I am dead and need Him who is the Resurrection and the Life. All I need I find in Christ, for whom I count all else but dross.

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