

(Basics) 19. Some More on Dead Works

by Zac Poonen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of doing good works out of love and joy, rather than out of fear or expectation of reward.

Duration: 13:25

Scripture: Deuteronomy 28, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 19:16-22, Matthew 20:1-16, Hebrews 6:1-2, Hebrews 11:6

Topics: "Faith And Works", "Genuine Obedience"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher uses the parable of the laborers in the vineyard from Matthew 20 to answer the question of what we should expect to gain from our work. The main difference between the last group of laborers and the others is that they did not have an agreement for any pay. Despite working for only one hour, the master rewards them first, giving them 12 times the pay of the first group. The preacher emphasizes that God values works done out of love and gratitude, not for the sake of obtaining a reward. He also highlights the danger of doing works merely to ease one's conscience, emphasizing the importance of genuine faith and obedience.

Transcript

We're going to continue our study today on the subject of dead works, which we considered earlier, marked out a religious person from a spiritual person, and it's important for you to know the difference. We've been trying to understand what it means to have a form of godliness without its power, or in other words, what it means to be just religious as opposed to being spiritual. Now, the danger of this is that religiosity finally makes everybody into a Pharisee.

Spirituality is what conforms us to the likeness of Christ, and the contrast between Jesus and the Pharisees is so great, so vast, we need to see that there is equally vast a difference between being spiritual and being religious. Dead works are spoken of in the New Testament as something that we need to repent of. We saw already five characteristics of dead works in previous studies.

They are works done without joy, without love, without zeal, without faith, works done for personal gain and honor. Now we want to look at a sixth characteristic of dead works. These are works which are done merely to ease one's conscience.

You see, all of us have got a conscience, and that conscience disturbs us when we do something which we feel a bit uneasy about inside. In fact, the heathen people also have it. In fact, in Romans chapter 2

and verse 15, it says that all people in the world, even if they have no external law, they have a law written in their heart, their conscience bearing witness, either accusing them or excusing or defending them.

And it's the same with us. Conscience develops in sensitivity as we listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, but our conscience can sometimes urge us to do something, and we do it merely to escape this harassing voice of conscience. Not out of love for God or because we feel this is what God wants us to do, but merely to escape the harassing voice of conscience.

I'll give you an example. You may feel one morning that you haven't read the Bible, and you're going to go to work, and your conscience tells you, hey, you haven't read the Bible. And so you open your Bible and sit down for two minutes, and maybe read a psalm or read a proverb or a few proverbs, and then you close your Bible and your conscience is eased, and you can go to work peacefully.

Otherwise, you may fear perhaps that you might have an accident on the road or something like that. This is not spirituality. This is superstition.

It's like people who keep a Bible under their pillows to have clean dreams. This is superstition. It is not spirituality.

People can pray. They feel that, oh, I haven't prayed. So I kneel down and spend five minutes just to ease my conscience, and then my conscience is relieved, and I get up, and I haven't become spiritual.

I'm just religious. You know, for the same reason people may go to meetings or pay their tithes or give money to beggars, just to ease one's conscience. All such works are dead works.

They're not evil works. I mean, to pray or read the Bible, how can it ever be evil? Now, there's a difference between doing these things as a discipline. I'm not saying that we should read the Bible only when we feel like it.

We don't live by feelings. We do what is right, whether we feel like it or not. It's like going to work.

You don't go to work only when you feel like it. You don't tell your children to go to school only when they feel like it. Even if it's raining, you still put on your raincoat or take an umbrella and go to work.

It's a discipline. You know that it needs to be done. So we don't read the Bible or pray only when we feel like it, because most of the time you may not feel like it.

And there's a place for discipline in the Christian life. That's not a dead work. Discipline is a very, very good thing for all Christians to have.

To have a discipline of reading the Scriptures and of commuting with God every day, of going to meetings regularly, etc., many things. But there is a difference between that and just seeking to do something to ease our conscience. For example, it could also be in the matter of evangelism.

A preacher can stir you up and say, there are millions of people dying without Christ, what are you doing about it? Why are you sitting earning your living? Why don't you go? And you decide to give up your job and go to reach the perishing millions without any call from God. You leave your job and you go to some other place to do Christian work and after some time you're just frustrated. You acted on the emotion of the moment or perhaps to relieve a guilty conscience.

Now, isn't it a good thing to go to some difficult place to preach the Gospel? But do you know the number of people who've gone to all these places and are frustrated? Because they did not wait upon the Lord. They did not seek to see, examine themselves, say, why am I going? Is it to ease my conscience? Or is it because I love the Lord and I see the Lord pulling me in that direction? There's a lot of difference. Otherwise you can end up with an endless round of dead works.

Like a merry-go-round, you go round and round and round and round and round and you can waste your life. Now, seventhly, dead works are works that are done out of fear of divine judgment. If you look at the Old Testament, you find that that was the only way God could get most of the Israelites to obey Him over there.

But you see that particularly in Deuteronomy chapter 28. In Deuteronomy 28, it says there in verse 15 onward and right through to the end of the chapter that if you don't obey the Lord and do all these things I'm commanding you, Moses says, you'll be cursed in the city, you'll be cursed in the country, you're going to have confusion and rebuke and sickness and your enemies will defeat you and you'll have poverty and all types of problems. And so the Israelites obeyed.

You know, this is the way we get children to obey us, by the fear of punishment. There's no other way to get a little child to obey. And when we obey God out of fear of punishment, it's better than disobedience, certainly.

And I would say dead works are certainly better than evil works. But God says you've got to repent of doing things merely because you're afraid of punishment. Jesus said, if you love me, keep my commandments.

Not like it says in Deuteronomy 28, if you don't want to be punished, keep my commandments. There's a lot of difference between the emphasis in Deuteronomy 28, verses 15 to the end of the chapter and what Jesus said in John 14, 15. See, many Christians haven't really understood that there's a great difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

That motive, the thing that impels me to do something is what God sees and is what makes us spiritual. For example, if we avoid telling lies because we're afraid we'd be caught, well, that's a good motive, but it's not the best motive. Jesus did not refrain from telling lies just because he was afraid he'd be caught.

Because it is dishonoring to the Father. It's contrary to God's nature. That's why he avoided it.

Now, if a doctor tells you that because you've got bitterness and an unforgiving attitude towards others, you're suffering from asthma or rheumatoid arthritis or migraine, so you better give up your bitterness and wrong attitudes and be positive towards other people, you may do that. What for? To be healed. Because you don't want to be punished.

But that's not works done for the glory of God. Those are dead works. So you see, there are many, many examples we could take where we do something because we're afraid if we don't do it, we'll be punished.

You don't want to get a sickness. You don't want to get a judgment from God. And so, with that selfish fear of judgment, we can avoid doing a lot of things and we can live a fairly upright life.

But that is not spirituality. Now let me go to an eighth characteristic of dead works. And that also we find in Deuteronomy 28.

It's the opposite of what we just considered. It's works that are done for the sake of obtaining a reward. You know, that's another way in which we deal with children.

We tell children, OK, if you finish your homework, I'll give you a chocolate or I'll take you for an outing or if you come first in the class, I'll get you a bicycle to go to school. And they work hard. Now in the Old Testament, God had to deal with the Israelites like that.

In Deuteronomy 28, verses 1 to 14, God says, if you are careful to keep all my commandments, you know what will happen? You'll be blessed in the city. You'll be blessed in the body. And God will bless your children.

God will bless the animals in your field. And your fields will prosper. And you'll get rain upon your land.

And God will bless you in so many ways. And so they kept the commandments because they wanted to be blessed. And do you know how much of this there is even among Christians? The Apostle Peter once asked Jesus, just after the rich young ruler had refused to give up all that he had to follow the Lord.

Peter compared himself with that rich young ruler in Matthew 19, 27. And said, but Lord, what about us? We've forsaken everything. I gave up my net and my job and security of being a fisherman down in Galilee and I followed you.

What am I going to get out of all this? And Jesus answered this question. What are you going to get out of it? With the story of a man who employed laborers in his vineyard. That's described in Matthew 20, verses 1-16.

And the essential point in that parable, if you read it carefully, is that the first few groups who came to work all came with an agreement to receive a certain amount of pay at the end of their work. And the last group was the only group of people who came without any agreement to receive any pay. That was the main difference between that last group and all the other people who preceded them.

And what was the result? That last group worked for only one hour. The first group worked for 12 hours. And in the end, we see the master rewarding the last group first.

They got, we could say, 12 times the pay of the first group if you consider what their hourly wage was. They got for one hour what the other people got for 12 hours. And there the Lord was answering Peter's question.

If you work thinking what you're going to get out of it, you're going to be last. But if you work joyfully, cheerfully, without thinking of what you're going to get in return, you're going to be first. Dead works are works done for the sake of obtaining a reward.

The only type of work that God wants is works done out of love, joyfully, cheerfully. Quality means much more to God than any amount of quantity. He's looking for a response of love and gratitude from us, not compulsory service out of fear or out of hope of obtaining a reward.

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