

(New Wine in New Wineskins) 13. Dead Works

by Zac Poonen

To avoid doing dead works, we must seek to do everything with the proper motivation, such as joy, love, and faith, and cooperate with the Spirit in living a disciplined life.

Scripture: Isaiah 54:6, Matthew 22:40, Romans 7:18, 2 Corinthians 9:7, Galatians 5:19, Hebrews 6:1, Hebrews 9:14, James 2:26, Revelation 3:1, Revelation 3:15

Topics: "Dead Works", "Genuine Faith"

Description

Zac Poonen delivers a powerful sermon on the distinction between the works of the flesh and dead works as mentioned in the New Testament. He emphasizes that indulging in sinful works will hinder one from inheriting the kingdom of God, while dead works, though appearing good externally, are corrupt at the source and displeasing to God. Poonen urges believers to repent not only from sin but also from dead works, highlighting the importance of a foundation of genuine faith and love before striving for perfection in Christ.

Transcript

The New Testament speaks of the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19) as well as of dead works (Hebrews 6:1).

Those who indulge in the works of the flesh such as immorality, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, etc., will certainly not inherit the kingdom of God. These works are so obviously sinful that it would be difficult for a believer to practise any of them without being convicted in his conscience.

Dead works, however, are more deceitful. They are externally good works, but they spring from a corrupt source (for nothing good dwells in our flesh) and are therefore like a filthy garment in God's eyes (Romans 7:18; Isaiah 54:6).

We are therefore commanded to repent not only from sin but from dead works too. It is only after we have laid such a foundation, that we can press on to perfection (Hebrews 6:1).

It is well known among believers that the blood of Jesus can cleanse us from all sin. What is not so well known is the fact that the blood of Christ must cleanse our conscience from dead works too before we can serve the living God aright (Hebrews 9:14).

It is essential therefore that we have a clear understanding of what dead works really are.

1. Works Done Without Joy

God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). He also loves a cheerful doer of His will. He meets those who rejoice in doing righteousness (Isaiah 64:5). When the Israelites did not serve the Lord with joy, they were punished by being made to serve their enemies (Deuteronomy 28:47, 48). The kingdom of God consists of righteousness accompanied by the joy of the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). Only those who delight to do His will can bring joy to the heart of God.

Consider the matter of tithing, for example. This was a law under the old covenant. But it is never commanded by Jesus or the apostles to those under the new covenant. Yet multitudes of covetous pastors compel their congregations to tithe compulsorily either through promises of divine reward or through threats of divine judgment. The people pay up, but without joy. It is not spontaneous giving, but grudging, reluctant giving. The pastors are happy when the offering boxes are full, but God is not. Pastors love large givers, but God loves only cheerful givers!

The new covenant principle is NOT, "Give as much as you can give", but, "Give as much as you can give cheerfully". God does not want any more than that. Of course you will receive in the same proportion as you give (2 Corinthians 9:7; Luke 6:38) - but that is another matter. God does not, however, desire any labour or gifts that are unwillingly given. What we do without joy is a dead work.

2. Works Done Without Love

To love God and man are the two pegs on which every other commandment hangs (Matthew 22:40). Remove these pegs and everything falls to the ground. This was why the leader of the Ephesian church was rebuked. His works were no longer motivated by love for God and man (Revelation 2:2, 4). If we obey the commandments of God without keeping their spirit, our works become dead works. If we are to be appointed by the Lord as shepherds of His flock, He will first test us (as He did Peter) to see whether we love Him supremely (John 21:15-17). Otherwise our service would be worthless. Likewise, it is not enough just to bless those who curse us. We are to love them from our hearts too. Otherwise we keep the letter of the Word but not its spirit. Similarly, if we serve the brothers and sisters in the church, because we are taught to do so, but still criticise them (perhaps for not being thankful to us), then our service becomes a pile of dead works. All our sacrifice for the Lord's work are worthless dead works if they do not spring out of love for Him.

3. Works Done Without Zeal

"I know your worksyou are lukewarm, neither cold nor hotbe zealous therefore" (Revelation 3:15-19). Half-hearted works are dead works. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength (Mark 12:30). Our worship and praise must be wholehearted, not lifeless and dead. Our praying must be with burden and our prophesying with zeal. We are to be "aglow with the Spirit" at all times (Romans 12:11). The fire must burn on the altar perpetually (Leviticus 6:13). We are to constantly fan to a flame the gifts of the Spirit that God has endued us with - not despise them or scorn them just because many have abused them (2 Timothy 1:7). Most Christian assemblies are today in a lifeless condition lacking the burning fire of the Holy Spirit. They are ready for being rejected by the Lord (Revelation 3:16) for their lack of zeal. We need to repent of such dead works in our own life.

4. Works Done Without Faith

As faith without works is dead (James 2:26), even so works without faith are dead works. Many prayer meetings are dead because of the lack of faith. Five minutes of faith filled prayer is more living and powerful for the accomplishment of God's purposes than an all night prayer meeting that has been gone through as a feat of endurance. Jesus prayed all night and so must we, when there is a need for this - but certainly not as a dead work. Faith also means personal conviction (Romans 14:22). What we do without personal conviction, is a dead work. Merely because some great man of God believes and teaches some particular doctrine, it does not mean that we are to imitate him. Yet Christendom is full of believers who blindly follow other men, without any personal conviction. Imitation always brings death. The Israelites crossed the Red Sea by faith. The Egyptians imitated them and were drowned (Hebrews 11:29). This has been written for our warning. Do not imitate the actions or the ministries of others. We are not to imitate the emphasis that another man has in his ministry either. That too would be a dead work. We are to prophesy according to the proportion of our own faith (Romans 12:6). God wants each of us to be ourselves, for He has a unique contribution to make through our own distinct personality to the body of Christ.

5. Works Done for Personal Gain and Honour

"I know your works that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead" (Revelation 3:1).

Here was a man who was spiritually dead, but who was still satisfied because he had a name that he was alive. He sought the praise of man more than the praise of God (John 5:44; 12:43); and as a result all his works were dead works. Anything we do to impress man is a dead work. Anything that we do, which we want others to know about, is also a dead work (Matthew 6:1-18). Living works are done in secret before God's face alone, with every possible attempt made to conceal it from the eyes of men. Whenever we glory in our accomplishments for God, we have begun to "worship the works of our hands" (Acts 7:41), and our works immediately become dead works. This is how Babylon is built, as Daniel 4:30 makes plain.

As soon as we are tempted to think about the opinion of others concerning ourselves or our work, we must throw those thoughts into the sewage system, where they belong. Even the opinions that great men of God have about us must be thrown out of our minds and sent into the sewage pipes. "Our righteousness in human eyes is an abomination (fit only for the sewage) in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15).

Only one who is radical like this can hope to escape dead works. In the same way, work done for the Lord, for a salary, is a dead work. Work done for a salary is not Christian work. It is secular work - even if it takes the name 'Christian'. It is impossible to serve God and money.

6. Works Done Merely to Ease One's Conscience

The heathen are prompted to certain works such as fasting, praying and giving alms because of the accusations of their conscience (Romans 2:15).

It is possible for Christians also to do such works merely to ease their conscience. Many read the Bible and pray daily, simply to relieve the accusations of their conscience. For the same reason, they go to meetings, pay their tithe, give alms to beggars, etc. All such works are dead works. There are preachers who capitalise on this weakness in believers and urge them to do something for the perishing millions 'without Christ'. "Either give or go", people are told. As a result, some give money, and others leave their jobs and go for Christian work. But both groups having acted without the leading of the Lord, but only on the emotion of the moment to relieve a guilty conscience, wind up in an endless round of dead works.

7. Works Done Out of Fear of Divine Judgment

To avoid sin because we fear the judgment of God is good, but that is certainly not the motive with which Jesus avoided sin. Jesus avoided sin because He wanted to please the Father. This is to be our motive too. Supposing there were to be no punishment for lusting after women, or for telling lies, or retaining a bitterness against another, would we indulge in those sins? Or would we still avoid them because our basic desire was to please God? Let each person answer that question for himself, and work out his own salvation from dead works with fear and trembling. To forgive others merely because we do not want to get some sickness as a judgment from God, or because we want God to forgive us, is a dead work - for it is motivated by a selfish fear of judgment. What shall we say then about those who read the Bible and pray in the mornings merely to avoid having any accidents during the day! That falls into the same class as the worst heathen superstition!

8. Works Done for the Sake of Obtaining a Reward

While it is true that Jesus will reward the faithful ones (Revelation 22:12) and while it is also true that the ultimate desire of our life should be to please the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:9) so that we can hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant" from Him one day, yet Jesus Himself warned us against the self-centred desire for even a heavenly reward, motivating us in our sacrifices and our service for Him.

When Peter compared himself favourably with the rich young ruler (who had just turned away from Jesus) and asked the question, "What shall we get for all that we have given up for you?" (Matthew 19:27), Jesus replied with the parable of the labourers (Matthew 20:1-16). There we find that those who worked for pay (reward) ended up last, while those who worked without any thought of reward ended up first (even though they had done only a small percentage of the work that the former had done).

Quantity versus quality - there we see the difference between dead works and living works. Works done with the hope of our ultimately being promoted above other believers and finding a place in the bride of Christ, will be exposed as dead works in the final day.

If you purify your thought-life, do good to others, and love your wife or submit to your husband, all with the thought of being exalted in some future day, then 'Self' is still at the centre of your life, and all your self-centred 'good' works are dead works!

Those who do get crowns in glory are quick to cast them down at the feet of the Lord, saying, "Thou alone art worthy" (Revelation 4:10). It is only when we have purged ourselves from motives other than the desire to glorify God, that we can be freed from dead works. If we keep a record in our memory of all the good works that we have done, those good works become dead works.

Jesus gave us two pictures of the final judgment day - one where people listed before the Lord all the good things that they had done in their earthly lives, "Lord, we prophesied in Your name, we healed the sick in Your name, etc." (Matthew 7:22, 23). These people were rejected by the Lord. In the other picture we find the righteous surprised when they are reminded by the Lord of the good that they had done in their earthly lives. "Lord, when did we do that?", is their surprised cry (Matthew 25:34-40). They had forgotten about the good that they had done - for they had not done those works for reward. There we see a clear contrast between dead works and living works. Which category do we fit into?

9. Works Done Without Bearing the Dying of Jesus

Living works are only those which flow from the life of Jesus within us. It is impossible to have this life of Jesus without first bearing the dying of Jesus - the daily cross (2 Corinthians 4:10). If we merely control our tongues from speaking angrily or our faces from scowling, but are still boiling with anger and irritation inside, that is not victory - it is suppression. That is the teaching of yoga and not of Jesus Christ. Jesus told us to take up our cross daily. That means to put the flesh to death daily (Galatians 5:24). Death by crucifixion is a long process - unlike shooting or hanging. The flesh cannot be shot or hung in a moment; it can only be crucified. But if we are faithful to keep this criminal on the cross, death will set in, in due course - and we shall one day cease from sin - even inwardly (1 Peter 4:1). Then the living works of the Spirit will flow as rivers of living water from our innermost being (John 7:38). Our inner attitudes will then correspond with our external appearance and works. There will then be no more need for artificial smiles or for any other form of external piety.

10. Works that Originate from Our Own Human Reason

Martha's unselfish and sacrificial work for the Lord and His people, is a good example of good works that are dead works (Luke 10:38-42). She did that work merely because she felt that it was a good work to do. But "the most important thing about a servant is that he does what his master tells him to do" - not what he feels like doing himself (1 Corinthians 4:2 - TLB). Thus, Mary was wiser, in that she first sat at Jesus' feet to hear what He wanted her to do. Hebrews 4:10, 12 says that God's word divides between the soulish and the spiritual; and just as we are to cease from sin, we are to cease from doing our own works too. Soulish works are dead works. Jesus never did anything on His own initiative (John 5:30). Even today God is looking not for those who have bright ideas about how to do His work (for such can only produce 'Ishmaels'), but for those who are humble enough to acknowledge their lack of wisdom and strength, and who will make themselves available for God to use, as it pleases Him. God looks, not for ability but availability.

Having heard about dead works now, the great danger for some of us may be that of backing away from the cliff of 'dead works', and falling over the cliff on the other side of the narrow way - the cliff of 'doing nothing'. That would be worse. The living works of the Spirit can be produced through us only as we cooperate with the Spirit in living a disciplined life - not law, but discipline.

Let us then cleanse ourselves not only from all defilement of the flesh, but also from that of the spirit (2 Corinthians 7:1), so that our righteous deeds may become our wedding dress on the day of the marriage of the Lamb (Revelation 19:8).

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