

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Freedom From Dead Works

by Dan Trygg

“Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God...”
Hebrews 6:1

“For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”
Hebrews 9:13,14

What are “dead works”? This phrase is used only in the two passages mentioned above. The author seems to refer to **actions or deeds done in an attempt to be righteous and accepted by God. They are called “dead” because they are ineffectual.** They cannot bring “life” into the person doing them, nor do they bring a relationship with God to life, either. They are empty, lifeless, ineffectual, dead.

What are some of these “dead works”?

(1.) Good deeds, done in an attempt to earn one’s way into God’s favor. This is a commonly-held belief of our time. People often think that if they are “good enough”, God will accept them into heaven. They often think of themselves as “pretty good people”, certainly better than most. They compare themselves to others, and feel that they measure up pretty well. It is almost as if they believe that God will grade people on a curve, like school teachers often will grade the students in their class. Top performers will receive an “A”, for outstanding work, then those who are above average will be awarded a “B” grade. Average performers receive a “C”, and those below average will receive a “D” grade. The very worst will receive an “F” for a “failing” performance. Proponents of this viewpoint will vary regarding where they perceive the “cut off point” may be, but they are convinced that *they* will make it into heaven.

Anyone who thinks this way clearly does *not* understand the nature of God’s holiness, and how utterly impossible it is for Him to accept sin, or abide with it. God does *not* use a “curve” to grade humankind. He determines our grade based upon a percentage score. He does not rank us against the performance of others. No. We are graded on a very clear and strict percentage basis. Only those who are deemed 100% righteous in all that they say and do will be allowed into heaven. One error, one unkind word, and we will have failed the test, and would be condemned to eternity apart from God. James, the brother of the Lord Jesus, says that if anyone were to stumble in keeping even *one part* of the Law, that person is guilty of the *entire* Law (2:10). No wonder that Paul asserts, “...by the works of the Law *no* flesh will be justified in His sight” (Rom. 3:20; cf. Gal. 2:16). Paul tells us “flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God; nor does the corruptible inherit the incorruptible” (I Cor. 15:50). **Heaven is not a place where “pretty good” abides. It is a place of absolute purity and incorruptibility.** “Well,” you say, “if it is like that, then I could never even *think* of getting there by my efforts. I am *already* incredibly disqualified. There is not even the slightest hope, because I have messed up so many times already in my life, ...and I know *me* well enough that I couldn’t live absolutely without fault or error for even *one day*, much less to imagine that I could keep it up for eternity.” **Would doing a few more good deeds help?** How about a thousand good deeds? Would that make you any more likely to be qualified? Of course not! **You and I are already hopelessly disqualified, because we have sinned!** **Does doing good deeds change any of that?** Does a million good deeds make me any less of an imperfect person, or can good deeds *erase* my white lies or my cross, impatient outbursts? NO!! Good deeds are absolutely *powerless* to change *me*. **Good works can’t erase my past, and they can’t change my selfish defects. They are incapable of giving me life. For that reason, they are called “dead works”.**

(2.) Religious acts or performance are likewise incapable of dealing with my defectiveness. Again, if our understanding of religion is that we can somehow earn our way into God’s favor and acceptance by performing religious duties, or observing religious disciplines, we are sadly mistaken. People get sucked into a system of religious performance that *promises* life and salvation, but is *incapable of delivering* what is promised.

Even the Old Testament religious system was incapable of removing sin, ...or transforming the sinner into a saint. The word, “atonement” in the OT meant to “cover”, not “remove”. All those blood sacrifices could not “remove” even *one* sin, much less change the heart of the one who offered the sacrifice. They were just temporarily “covered” until they could be removed by a sacrifice that was worth much more than a human life. It is clear that the life of a bull or goat was not as valuable as a human life, so it only stands to reason that the blood of bulls and goats cannot pay for or take away human sin. Many religious systems understood this, so they upped the ante by offering *human beings* in an attempt to pay for sin. *God never asked for this.* First of all, it defeats the

purpose. God wants to *save people*, not *destroy them*. Secondly, no one even *could* give his life in exchange for another, because *he* was a sinner, too! His life would only be the just penalty for his *own* sin (Rom. 6:23). Even if he offered himself willingly, he couldn't help anyone else. No. To remove sin would require an *absolutely sinless sacrifice*, a sacrifice that would be worth *at least as much* as the life it hopes to redeem. **To pay for the sin of all humankind would require a sacrifice of infinite worth.** Thirdly, any strategy of religious practice means *nothing* if God is not interested in accepting it in exchange for the life of the one offering it. God is not under obligation to accept some elaborate scheme *we* come up with. **How would we know if it is acceptable to God? Well, only if He proposes it, or somehow tells us this is what He requires.** Fourth, whatever religion proposes must be able to not only *pay* for our *sins*; it must be capable of *transforming us* to no longer be sinners.

When you take all of these considerations into account, you can begin to see that, **if there is to be any hope for us, salvation must not depend upon our religious performances**, acts of contrition, acts of penance, prayers of others, or any other scheme that would require we *do* something to remove our sin, or somehow cancel it out. **We could never do enough to even begin to cover our faults and failings. Furthermore, these religious acts cannot change the human heart.** Otherwise, those who are the priests, the devoted religious elite, would be without fault, or at least approaching it. Not WORKING!! Have you read the paper, lately? Paul *tells* us that it is profitless to “submit yourself to decrees, such as, ²¹ ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ ²² (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) -- in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? ²³ These are matters which have, to be sure, the *appearance* of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but *are of no value against fleshly indulgence*” (Col 2:20-23). Eating certain foods, or not eating them, ...observing certain religious days, ...going to religious services, ...fasting, ...offering repetitious prayers, ...giving large sums of money, ...imagining that dead people can, or would, pray for you, ...or any other religious practices devised by men are totally bankrupt. (Regarding calling out to Mary or “the saints” to pray for you, Mary was just a person, a human being. She is never described as more than that in the Bible. The universal testimony of the scriptures is that when the righteous die, they will *rest* until Jesus returns. To think that Mary or other righteous people could hear the cries of believers today makes them out to be much more than human beings, and conflicts with the testimony of the Bible. They are *resting*, not hearing and interceding for people who are trying to call to them. We are clearly told *not* to seek to speak to the dead in Deut. 18:11, yet *religious leaders encourage their people to pray to them?* Again, unbiblical, religious practices devised by men.) **By doing these things you are not able to remove your sin, nor are you able to be transformed inside. These religious practices are also “dead works”. They cannot give you life.**

If you will look at the first passage listed at the top of this study, you will notice that **there is a need for “repentance from dead works”**. Why *repentance*? **Repentance means a change of mind or perception. It means realizing that dead works are, in fact, ineffectual and powerless.** God knew how absolutely hopeless it was for us to ever pay for our own sin, and how impossible it is for us to become “incorruptible” and heaven-worthy. **Instead of telling us to “try harder”, God stepped in and provided an entirely different answer to our dilemma. He put forth Jesus as a perfect sacrifice**, one of infinite worth, who could die in our place to forever *remove* any debt of sin, **and, put us into Christ** so that when He died we died; when He was buried, we were buried; and when He was raised, we too were raised to newness of life. **This is the basis for a new life. This is not at all based on our performance, our trying harder. It is all about what He has done and will do for us, if we will accept His plan.** To accept this means we have to stop trying to be “good enough” and recognize that He alone can make us good. It brings us back to where humanity was before the fall, and we have the choice to say, “Lord, *Your way is better*. I want to follow You. I want You to be the Source and Director of my life.” This is key. **A heaven-worthy life is a life yielded to God, a life that trusts in His love and wisdom. God offers this whole new-life-package to us freely, as a gift. If we receive it, our entire destiny changes.** Our orientation changes from self to God. We climb off the treadmill of trying-harder into the lap of “Daddy”, and He puts into us a new, incorruptible life. This life can be experienced and matured *now*. It is *not fully* revealed until Christ comes, and the old Adam-nature falls away. It *is* in His righteous image now, however.

Note, too, that the writer says, “...let us move on to maturity, not laying *again* a foundation of repentance from dead works”. Why does he say *that*? Because **so many people keep going back to the “trying-harder mentality”**. **That will never work, ...and we can't move on to maturity until we abandon that mindset.** The other passage mentioned how Jesus came to “cleanse our conscience away-from dead works to serve the living God.” **Clearly, living by a “dead works mentality” is counter-productive to spiritual maturity and usefulness in serving God.** It keeps us focused on *our* performance, instead of *centering our attention on God*, His grace and His leading in our lives. **When we keep our hearts in grace, we are not conscious of sin. We are conscious of God and focused on Him.** That opens us up to the life-flow of the Holy Spirit, and God will fill us with His vitality and love. **He will motivate us to do good works, not out of a need for acceptance, but from an outflow of His love and joy in us.** These are not *dead* works. These occur when *life works* in us. We are free from *dead* works to serve in *life-giving joy* of the Spirit.