

The Way of Christ Ministries

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Dead Works

Hebrews 6:1 (ESV) *Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God...*

1 Introduction

The biblical term “dead works” encompasses a broad spectrum of actions, but its etymology is rooted in those actions that engender death:

Isaiah 64:6 *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*¹

Consequently, dead works refer to endeavors undertaken with the intention of securing favor or achieving righteousness before God through human ability; actions which are devoid of genuine faith, love, and obedience. No matter how well meaning, our actions can result in dead works. Regardless of their well-intentioned nature, our actions can result in dead works.

Isaiah 55:8–9 *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

2 Forms of Dead Works

Obviously any action deemed sinful by God or contrary to His will is akin to a dead work, and all *sin* leads to death, even sins of omission. However, the Bible’s interpretation of “dead works” pertains to our attempts to act in accordance with our own judgment, disregarding God’s guidance. We get into trouble when we rely on human *wisdom* rather than God’s wisdom.

Proverbs 14:12 *There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.*

Let us explore various manifestations of dead works:

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1. Works done in an attempt to earn salvation: The Bible teaches that salvation is a gift from God received through faith in Jesus Christ, not earned by human effort or “good works”. Dead works can refer to attempts to earn God’s favor or forgiveness through religious practices, rituals, or moral efforts. These works are considered dead because they are ultimately futile in achieving salvation, which is freely given through God’s grace.

Ephesians 2:8–9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

1 Peter 1:18–19 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

We can never earn or pay for our salvation—nothing we do can equal the precious blood of Christ, nor the perfectly sinless life he lived on our behalf. If we could earn our salvation, then it would nullify God’s grace.

2. Works done without faith or love: The Bible emphasizes that true faith in God is essential for works to be acceptable to Him. Works done with a focus on self-righteousness or for the sake of appearances rather than out of love and obedience to God are considered dead works. For example, religious rituals performed without genuine faith or charitable acts done with a desire for recognition are examples of dead works.

Matthew 6:1 “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Romans 9:30–32 What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone.

3. Works that are contrary to God’s will: Any action that violates God’s commands or is motivated by sin can be considered a dead work. These works are spiritually lifeless because they stem from a heart that is not aligned with God’s character and purposes.

1 Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

In summary, dead works are actions that are spiritually lifeless because they are not rooted in faith, love, and obedience to God. They can be religious practices, attempts to earn salvation, or actions that are contrary to God’s will. True faith,

on the other hand, leads to works that are motivated by genuine love and glorify God.

Hebrews 9:14 *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!*

3 Good Works

James 2:14–17 *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

Christians are commanded to perform “good works” or deeds which are performed under the Holy Spirit’s guidance in faith and love. Our faith should compel us to attend to the needs of others.

Philippians 2:3–4 *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*

“I was hungry,
and you formed a humanities group to discuss my hunger.

I was imprisoned,
and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release.

I was naked,
and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.

I was sick,
and you knelt and thanked God for your health.

I was homeless,
and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.

I was lonely,
and you left me alone to pray for me.

You seem so holy, so close to God But I am still very hungry — and lonely — and cold.” [Author unknown]

4 Application

How then can we turn our lives from dead works to good works in accordance with God’s will and Christian doctrine?

1. Repent of dead works: Examine your life to ascertain whether you are engaging in dead works. Ask God to reveal your dead works to you and put an end to them.
2. Pursue opportunities for charitable deeds, glorifying God and assisting others. However, exercise caution in evaluating your motives behind such actions.
3. Ask yourself these questions:
 - Will this action glorify God?
 - Is it in accordance with God's will and scripture?
 - Am I performing this action out of faith and love?
 - Am I expecting to benefit in some way from this?

We must acknowledge that the resolution of global issues are an insurmountable challenge. That the presence of sin will remain pervasive until the return of Christ underscores this reality. Nevertheless, as long as calamities, poverty, suffering, and conflicts persist, there will persist opportunities for Christians to contribute to a more benevolent world. While our individual efforts may not have a profound impact on the global scale, we can significantly improve the lives of those within our reach.

We can help the poor, the sick, the immigrant, but all the while we must exhibit Christ to them, and share the gospel with others. Remember our primary duty to Christ is to lead others unto him and unto salvation.

Mark 16:15 *He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.*

5 Prayer

"Heavenly Father, thank you for your scripture to help us better know you and your will, and for the gift of your Son Jesus, in whom we have eternal life. Please show me any dead works in my life and help me to repent of them. Identify opportunities for good works that I can perform, and fill me with faith and love to carry out your will. Please make my efforts glorify you and inspire others; help me be an example of Christ's love to the world. Amen."

May God bless you, your family, and your friends.
Your brother in Christ,
Kevin

Appendix A—References & Further Reading

- [1] Kent, Homer A.; *Faith That Works: Studies and the Epistle of James*; BMH Books; 2005. (Not cited.)
- [2] Sider, Ronald; *Good News and Good Works: A Theology for the Whole Gospel*; Baker Books; 1999. (Not cited.)
- [3] Wallis, Jim; *Faith Works: How to Live Your Beliefs and Ignite Positive Social Change*; Random House; 2000. (Not cited.)

Appendix B—Scripture References

Proverbs

14:12; [1](#)

Isaiah

55:8–9; [1](#)

64:6; [1](#)

Matthew

6:1; [2](#)

Mark

16:15; [4](#)

Romans

9:30–32; [2](#)

1 Corinthians

10:31; [2](#)

Ephesians

2:8–9; [2](#)

Philippians

2:3–4; [3](#)

Hebrews

6:1; [1](#)

9:14; [2](#)

James

2:14–17; [3](#)

1 Peter

1:18–19; [2](#)