

Initial Repentance
I Thessalonians 1:4-9
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6/23/19

Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

I. Introduction: The last message I delivered here was titled “Genuine God-given Faith.” The text was taken from Romans 10 and we read there in verses 9-10, “***That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. ¹⁰For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.***” I focused on what it means to believe with the heart unto righteousness. And you may recall how I showed that repentance from dead works and former idolatry always accompanies genuine God-given faith and is one of the key evidences that one truly has believed with the heart unto righteousness.

I closed that message by showing the connection between believing unto righteousness and repentance by reviewing again that familiar passage from Acts 17 where Paul closes his sermon on Mars Hill, noting in verse 30 how God “***...commandeth all men (not just some, but all men) every where to repent: ³¹Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.***” Here we saw again that the standard by which all are judged is the perfect, justice-satisfying merits of the obedience unto death of the Lord Jesus Christ (that’s His righteousness). And we are commanded to repent because this is the standard of judgment. I.e. – We are to repent (turn away from and reject) the evil, natural notions that (if and when we become religious) we all initially entertain in our initial state of spiritual blindness – that anything other than the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed (or charged to our account) could qualify us so as to be accepted before a holy God.

Well as I noted then, I wanted to delve further into this subject of “Initial Repentance” than time would permit in that one setting so that’s where I want to direct your attention today. I’ve titled this message “Initial Repentance.”

And I use the term “initial” to distinguish it from the ongoing repentance and sorrowfulness over sins that believers continue to experience throughout their lives. By “Initial Repentance,” I’m focusing on the repentance that always accompanies the God-given gift of faith that sinners receive in their regeneration (in the new birth) and in their conversion in belief of the Gospel. From this pulpit, you’ve often heard this referred to as “repentance from dead works and former idolatry” and those are indeed biblical descriptions of this initial repentance that we will be examining this morning.

- II. Repentance common to all who are saved: We often lump these two together because repentance from dead works and repentance from idolatry are not referring to two separate experiences. Rather, that simply describes two aspects of the one common initial repentance experienced by all who are saved. By faith, we come to Christ (as His Person and work are set forth in the Gospel of God’s grace) for all salvation – the Christ whereby we know the one living and true God. So as faith is turning to God through Christ, by definition, this also involves a turning away (a repentance) from that which we previously (and naturally, but mistakenly) believed about how God saves sinners. And that object of our faith, our gospel, identifies the god we worship as to whether it is the true God of the Bible or a false god, an idol.

Now we can reduce the multitude of religions (or all gospels – i.e., how folks imagine sinners to be saved or found acceptable before their god) down into 1 of 2 categories. Right now, if you consider yourself to be saved (or eternally blessed by your notion of a higher power), you do so on the basis of either (1) the true religion of grace – of salvation exclusively in and by the doing and dying of the Lord Jesus Christ with the merits of that finished work being put to your account (i.e. – based upon your being found righteous in Him, God having imputed His righteousness to you) or else (2) you count yourself saved on the basis of the popular, but false religion of works (which granted, in false “Christianity,” is often disguised under the name of “salvation by grace”) but nonetheless, I’m speaking of any way of salvation that has one imagining that something done by, in, or through them, the sinner, contributes at least in some way to their being saved. It’s either grace – salvation conditioned on Christ alone in which you play no causal role or else it’s works – salvation imagined to be conditioned on the sinner, at least in some way or to some degree, be it ever so small.

And in Romans 11, God through Paul declares that there is no in-between, that these 2 ways, grace and works, cannot be mixed. It's one or the other.

So, the God we worship is distinguished by how we imagine He saves sinners. If one is resting in the popular belief of salvation by works, then according to the Bible, that is to be worshipping a god who cannot save and remain true to the character of the one living and true God as He is set forth in the Bible. That would be a false god – an idol if you will. So I say all this to show you how repentance from dead works is akin to repentance from idolatry. Let's look at these 2 descriptions.

III. Repentance from Dead Works:

- A. Hebrews 6:1: Put simply, any work done by the sinner that is imagined to be a difference-maker in their being saved is a “dead” work or “fruit unto death.” Dead works” refers to any attempts of our own to attain or maintain salvation’s benefits – anything that proceeds from us that we imagine makes a difference in our going to heaven – in our eternal salvation. Such works are appropriately called “dead” works because those who are spiritually “dead” perform them,” because they are fruitless in that they do not accomplish what they were presumed to be able to accomplish (one’s own salvation), and because the ultimate end of those who never repent from dead works is eternal death. As I showed in the previous message, all who are saved start out this life’s journey as spiritually dead and in that state, any and all of our works that are imagined to contribute in some way to our being saved are “dead works” or “fruit unto death” to use another scriptural description.

As Paul wrote in Romans 7:5, “***For when we were in the flesh, <lost – spiritually dead> the motions of sins, which were by the law, <in other words, what we as spiritually blind sinners were moved to do in order to satisfy what we thought would meet the requirements to be saved> did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death.***” Now that “fruit unto death” is the same as “dead works.”

So let's look at that in Hebrews 6:1 where we read, “***Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God,***” Now what I want you to notice here is that repentance from dead works and faith toward God are set forth as foundational principles of the doctrine of Christ.

Foundational – If it’s foundational, that means it is a vital, critical basic building block, fundamental to the vital doctrine of Christ. The doctrine of Christ is the vital truth of the Gospel that is believed upon by all those who are saved.

As we read in 2 Jn 1:9: ***“Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son.”*** So, by this we know that repentance from dead works is an identifying characteristic (along with God-given faith) of all believers as it is foundational to the vital doctrine of Christ. And so, it is vital that you and I both understand and experience repentance from dead works.

- B. Hebrews 9:14: Now over in Hebrews 9, we have a comparison being made between (1) the offering of animal sacrifices as the Jews were commanded to do under the old covenant with (2) the supreme offering that these animal sacrifices foreshadowed, the sacrificial offering of the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God. And after describing in verse 13 the temporal benefits which the blood of these animal sacrifices could accomplish, we read in verse 14 how by contrast, ***“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?”***

First, notice from this passage that this purging of our conscience from dead works, is a blood work. It is the certain fruit and effect of Christ’s shed blood, His redemptive work, that purges the conscience concerning “who we are in reality” – depraved sinners with nothing of merit to offer from our own hand (our own works) for we come to see such efforts aimed at saving ourselves as dead works.

The conscience refers to our seat of judgment. And notice the definite connection between the purged conscience and serving the living God. From the language of verse 14 we can know with a certainty that the purging of a sinner’s conscience from dead works (as a result of Christ’s shed blood for the sinner), is necessary in order for one to serve the one true and living God. So here we see again how God brings those He saves to see aright both 1) who He is and 2) who we are – sinners in desperate need of God’s grace to provide a perfect righteousness for us whereby we are found accepted in God’s sight – a saving work we sinners cannot produce for ourselves.

So to recap, so far we've seen from:

1. Hebrews 6 that Repentance from Dead works is a Foundational Principle of the doctrine of Christ – of the Gospel. And...
2. From Hebrews 9 that this is a blood work – a direct and sure fruit and effect of Christ's accomplishment for everyone for whom He died.
3. And so one who repents of dead works is one whose conscience has been purged from dead works so as to serve the one true and living God whereby they repent of having worshipped a false and dead god – no god at all, an idol.

C. Repentance from Idolatry: Now let's visit our primary text in I Thessalonians, chapter 1. Paul opens the chapter telling these believers at Thessalonica how that he, Silas, and Timothy gave thanks to God for them. I want to pick up with verse 4, but this verse actually is the closing of a sentence that began back in verse 2. So, from the beginning of vs. 2 this would read, ***"We give thanks to God always for you all, (and the thought continuing into vs. 4), "Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God."*** The literal reading of the verse would be, "Knowing, [brethren – beloved of (or by) God], your election."

And then as we go through the rest of the chapter, Paul tells us how he knows them to be among those chosen unto salvation in Christ, God's elect, saying in verse 5, ***"For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.*** As I related in the message on genuine faith, the "believing with the heart unto righteousness" we looked at in Romans 10 is akin to the gospel coming to them not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Ghost, etc.

Continuing in our text in verse 6, Paul goes on to say ⁶***And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost.*** You received the word in affliction. You didn't merely gain a little higher knowledge. No – when it came to this Gospel, you now received something that caused others to oppose you, especially if they figure out how you now judge what you once believed – which by implication tells them how you now fear for their eternal well-being if they were of that like-minded, but false faith.

Verse 7... ⁷ ***So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.*** Now the word “ensamples” is translated from a Greek word referring to a die, a stamp, a pattern, and as such, we can conclude that Paul is describing identifying characteristics of all true believers. This is much like what Paul wrote to Timothy in I Timothy 1:16: ***“Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.”*** In my previous message, we saw that pattern of Paul’s initial repentance on vivid display in the Philippians 3 passage. All that he previously thought commended him to God, in repentance, he put in the loss column.

And here to these believers in Thessalonica, he’s telling them that likewise they are a pattern to all that believe. God, through Paul, is telling us we can know their election (as Paul stated in verse 4) because as “ensamples,” they possess the identifying characteristics of all that believe. They fit the pattern and have responded in these ways that are characteristic of all true believers.

It’s not uncommon for kin folks to bear some resemblance to one another. And here we see that all of those who are translated into the kingdom, as children of the King (spiritually having a kinsman redeemer in Christ, their Substitute) bear resemblance to one another in this sense – they fit the pattern of those who believe – as we read here, even ***“...to all that believe...”***

And as such, unless and until we also possess these identifying characteristics, we have no warrant to presume ourselves to be among the beloved of God as one of His elect – chosen unto salvation in Jesus Christ. Verse 8 – ***“⁸ For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.”*** That is, they knew their election by the gospel they identified with, and preached and promoted elsewhere – it being the one and the same as that which had been delivered to them – the Gospel (of how God saves sinners through Christ alone). Verse 9 - ***“⁹ For they themselves (i.e. – those fellow believers to whom their faith toward God had been spread abroad) shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God;”***

Notice the resemblance in the language here and what we looked at in Hebrews 9:14 where it spoke of how the blood of Christ had purged their ***“...conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”***

Here we see how these 2 aspects of repentance, (1) repentance from idolatry (turning from a false god to the one, true and living God, and (2) repentance from dead works both describe that which is experienced by all true believers in the initial repentance that accompanies true, God-given faith.

D. Idolatry Exposed: I know there are many who claim to believe what they consider to be the doctrines of grace, but who consider themselves and / or others to have been saved at a time when their doctrine was actually contrary to the doctrine of Christ – diametrically opposed to God’s Gospel of sovereign grace, salvation conditioned on Christ alone, where God gets all the glory. So while they may have learned some new doctrine, have they recognized the slander on God’s character embodied in their former, evil thoughts of God? Notice the wording in our primary text of I Thessalonians 1:9, that the “ensample” of a true believer is one who has, “***...turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God***;

For your god to be true, He must possess the qualities of character that are true of Deity as it is proclaimed in God’s Word. For God to be God, He must be sovereign, just, love, all-powerful, all-knowing, holy – perfect or impeccable in every attribute of character. And many, like myself in years past, presume to ascribe to their god these character attributes and yet in their ignorance of the necessity of having the righteousness of God imputed to them – the perfect satisfaction to God’s injured justice due unto the sins of those for whom Christ died, the very righteousness which is revealed if and when the Gospel comes in power, in the Holy Spirit, and in full assurance – (in this ignorance) they expose that their god (i.e. – as they perceive God to be) does not act or live according to His true attributes. They assume that God will save sinners in ways that actually deny the very attributes they think they agree belong to the one true God. Like me in years past, in spiritual blindness they are walking contradictions. Consider some of the attributes that are unwittingly denied by the majority of so-called “Christians” who tragically insist (as I once did) that Christ died for everyone.

A. Sovereign – To say that God is sovereign is to say that God is God. He is in control. In Ephesians 1:11 we’re told that God “***...worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:***” (Eph. 1:11). In Isaiah 46:9-10 God says, “***Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me,*** ¹⁰ ***Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel*** <i.e. – His purpose contrived by infinite wisdom> ***shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:***”

Now how different is this sovereign God of the Bible from the god of most of modern day “Christianity?” I now know that the god I once worshipped would actually have been a helpless being, an object to be pitied rather than one to be revered. To believe that the one you presume to be god is not sovereign in any area is to believe in a false god – an idol. Many concede that God is sovereign in many areas, but not in salvation. They teach that God the Father purposed the salvation of all mankind, that God the Son died with the express intention of saving the whole human race, and that God the Holy Spirit is now seeking to win the world to Christ. And yet even they admit that the great majority of men and women are dying in sin, without Christ, and passing into a hopeless eternity, making their god an abject failure – unable to fulfill that which he is presumed to have purposed. That’s an idol.

To deny the sovereignty of God in salvation – i.e. denying what He says, that He “...**will have mercy on whom** <He> **will have mercy...**” (Rom. 9:15) – is to worship a god who is not worthy to be worshipped. This is because sovereignty characterizes His whole being. He is sovereign in the exercise of all of His attributes – His power, His mercy, His love, His grace. Sadly, many presume the will of their Creator is subordinate to the “sacred,” so-called free will of the creature.

- B. Consider the justice of God – God is just. Think of the implications of believing that Christ died for the sins of all mankind while acknowledging that many of these will perish in hell anyway. Only an unjust and ruthless monster would send any folks to hell whose sin debt allegedly had already been paid by the precious, shed blood of Christ for them. The belief that Christ died for all without exception exposes an erroneous concept of God which by default requires one to view God as unjust even though in our spiritual blindness we fail to recognize this (and other) slanderous assaults on His character, implicit in that false doctrine. Many will reply as I once did, “I just didn’t think of it like that.” Right – that is to have no regard for the honor of the holy character of the one true God of the Bible. That’s not a “Godward” faith as Paul described it in our text. In our scripture reading from Isaiah 45 where God declared they were praying to a god who cannot save, He then distinguished Himself as the One to look to for salvation as a “just God and a Savior.” An unjust god is an idol.
- C. Consider God’s Love –. As mere mortals, we strive to engage all that we are, every attribute and faculty of our being to insure the well-being of those we truly love. But the popular concept of God’s love would have us imagining that He stops short of engaging His infinite abilities to insure the salvation of all the objects of His love.

To repeat an illustration I've used in the past, consider for a moment a young mother and her toddler enjoying a sunny afternoon lounging around a swimming pool. Suddenly the toddler stumbles into the water and is on the verge of drowning. The mom, a former lifeguard, immediately dives in and rescues the child because she loves him. Can you possibly imagine this young mother, wise and capable enough to save her child, opting not to engage her abilities to do so? Why, she had warned him not to get too close. In the stubborn rebellion that we're all born with as sinners, then he had to get too close. So should she let her rebellious, but beloved child drown simply because it was his own free-will decision to get too close to the pool's edge? No, we'd say lock her up for such neglectful actions. But that's exactly what today's popular false "Christianity" implies about God. It says that He fails to save many of what are presumed to be the objects of His unchanging, everlasting love. This accuses God of one or more of the following:

1. If it is assumed that He loves everyone, including those He condemns to hell, then He must not be all-knowing or not wise enough to have foreseen the obstacles to their salvation. Or if not that, it must be that ...
2. While He is presumed to love all, including those that perish, He must not be powerful enough to overcome the obstacles and difficulties in order to save them. Or if not that, we must conclude that...
3. His love is certainly not perfect, unconditional, unchangeable and everlasting. Actually, it is worthless – for although He is infinitely wise and powerful, He opts not to intervene and engage Himself to insure the well-being of these presumed objects of His love, allowing many of them to perish according to their will, leaving what many believe to be God's own will as an unfulfilled pipe dream.

I hope this helps you see how such deadly misconceptions of God's way of salvation (a false gospel – not the doctrine of Christ) – how it is actually a denial of God Himself and thereby equates to idolatry.

D. What about His Immutability? In Malachi 3:6, God says, ***"For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed."*** God changes not, but such a reactionary god – one who reacts to the sinner's decision – by definition must change his mind in response. That's not the sovereign, immutable God of the Bible. That would be an idol.

E. What about His Holiness? God is holy. Holiness is the very excellency of the Divine nature. It speaks of the perfection of every attribute of His character that sets God apart. His justice is a holy justice (It's perfect and unerring). His wisdom is a holy wisdom, etc. Here we see how denying the perfection of any of God's attributes is a denial of who He is – an idol to be repented of.

Nothing but perfection and excellence can proceed from holy God. So God's character is not one dimensional as if His mercy can override everything else – as if He will set aside His holiness, or His justice, or be less than all-powerful or all-knowing so that He can save us in the way that fallen men and women naturally would choose to be saved – by something they do (or some decision they make) to make the real difference that gives them the glory (and room to boast). No, ***“...He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.”*** (I Cor. 1:31).

The only way God can be true to who He is (both a just God and a merciful Savior) is through the imputation of the righteousness that Christ, as the Representative, Substitute, and Surety for His people, single-handedly established in perfect satisfaction to God the Father's law and justice – the righteousness revealed in God's Gospel of grace, the Gospel that is believed by every elect, justified, redeemed, and born again sinner by the power of God the Holy Spirit, a faith that is always accompanied by repentance from the god we once prayed to – a god who cannot save – an idol. You see, the living and true God is One who (1) is true to all of the impeccable qualities of character that belong only unto God and (2) as a living God, exercises those qualities of character, engaging Himself on behalf of all the objects of His everlasting love.

VI. Closing: A message like this may seem harsh to some but I for one know I'm glad that in God's due time He brought me under the sound of this Gospel and drew me to Himself so as to repent of my former idol and the presumed dead works I thought counted for something. Paul wrote this to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 6, beginning in verse 16, ***“And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹⁷Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, ¹⁸And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.”***

The Bible tells us that believing on Christ (as He is set forth in the Bible) in belief of the Gospel, gives evidence of one being saved. And in so believing on the one living and true God, we leave an idol behind and here God declares He will receive those who do – for only His dear children do so by the power of the living and true God – One who has engaged all that He is – His infinite power, wisdom, justice, mercy, and every other holy attribute so as to insure the eternal good for all of the objects of His infinite, everlasting, unconditional love.

So pray that for someone who hears this message, God’s Spirit will do a heart work – grant them the blood-bought gift of faith and repentance that is so graciously given to all of God’s elect at God’s appointed time – a work I hope and pray and rejoice in knowing that He already has done for many of you. And we pray for this so that God might receive all the glory, that Christ might be exalted, that all boasting in the sinner might be excluded, and so that we might enter into religious fellowship and rejoice with them – as Paul put it, knowing of their election by this distinguishing mark – because they too have “...**turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.**” (I Thess. 1:9).

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God’s grace found in the only infallible source, God’s word itself – the Bible.