

"Turn Around When Possible"

By Allan Pole



Theme: We must make a U-turn to find the road to life.

Text: Hebrews 6:1

Here's a thought: Good works are God's works done through us as directed by God's Spirit.

Years ago, I was driving home with my sister from Saskatchewan and we were having a great talk while the kilometres flew by. Suddenly, I had this sinking feeling when I came to a corner and realized that we had been going the wrong way for the last hour! This was well before the days of GPS devices or smartphones so I pulled over and checked the map. True enough, we spent an hour going the wrong way but it could have been worse - we could have spent *two* hours going the wrong way or we could have ended up at the wrong destination!

Imagine going through your whole life only to discover you had been headed in the wrong direction. Imagine standing before the Creator and Judge of the universe only to discover you had reached the wrong conclusions about Him and your eternal fate was decided. By that time there will be no turning back. Imagine your life's works failing to pass the test and you lose eternal rewards that could be yours because you lived in disobedience and you refused to make adjustments along the way.

We are called to make adjustments in Hebrews 5:11-6:3:

11 We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. 12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! 13 Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. 14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. **6:1 Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death,** and of faith in God, 2 instruction about baptisms,

the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. 3 And God permitting, we will do so. NIV

A spiritual turnaround requires the recognition of:

Dead Works



I came across this sign in a shop window in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Put yourself in the sandals of these Jewish readers. We aren't told who wrote the book of Hebrews but the original recipients would know what the author was writing about when he speaks of moving beyond the basics of the faith. New converts to Judaism would be taught the fundamentals and they would understand that you can't stand still – you are either progressing spiritually or you are backsliding.

The word “death” comes from a Greek word “nekron” that refers to a corpse – a powerfully vivid word picture! It is from this word that we get the word "necromancy", the supposed practice of communicating with the dead.

The word “works” comes from a Greek word “ergon” that speaks of deeds or labour. We get the English words “energy” and “ergonomic” from this word. “Ergon” is used in verse 9 of Ephesians 2:8-10:

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. NIV

Paul says emphatically in Ephesians 2:8 that salvation is by grace through faith and not from ourselves. However, he goes on to say in verse 10 that we are God's workmanship – God's poiema or God's poem – created to do His works. The works might look really good on the outside but the difference is the motivation and the fruit – all of which becomes clear over time.

Religious, hard-working, clean-living people can be amongst the most difficult to reach with the salvation message. Self-righteousness can root itself deeply and subtly so a person comes to convince himself that he is okay and is in no need of a Saviour.

Lent is the period of 40 days which comes before Easter in the Christian calendar. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, Lent is a season of reflection and preparation before the celebrations of Easter. By observing the 40 days of Lent, Christians replicate Jesus Christ's sacrifice and withdrawal into the desert for 40 days. Lent is marked by fasting, both from food and festivities (from www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/holydays/lent_1.shtml). I give up coffee for Lent. ☺

Lent can be a meaningful opportunity for us to pray and fast, but the danger with such disciplines is they can become mere outward acts done with hearts that are far from God. This is also true of church attendance, congregational singing, Bible reading, tithing, giving, serving and other activities.

The Law and the Prophets repeatedly talk about a walk with God that goes beyond outward observance of rules and regulations. The patriarch of all Jews modelled this in Genesis 15:4-6:

4 Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man [your servant Eliezer] will not be your heir, but a son [Isaac] coming from your own body will be your heir." 5 He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 6 Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. NIV

Abram, later called Abraham, was not sinless or perfect. Moses and the Law would come 400 years later, so Abraham's salvation would not be determined by good works or by observing the Law. You could say that "dead works" are all deeds done outside fellowship with and obedience to God. Abraham believed the Lord, obeyed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness.

Good works are God's works done through us as directed by God's Spirit. Charles Caleb Colton (1780-1832) observed:

A windmill is eternally at work to accomplish one end, although it shifts with every variation of the weathercock, and assumes ten different positions a day.

1900 years after Abraham and 600 years before Christ the prophet Habakkuk writes (2:4), "The righteous or the just shall live by faith." We often think that before the Messiah came people were saved by keeping the law. The Apostle Paul explains in his letters to the Romans and Galatians that people were *never* saved by keeping the law. On the contrary, a relationship with God is and always has been built upon faith and obedience. We typically sell faith short by reducing it to mental assent to a certain statement of faith. James 1:19 says that even the demons believe there is a God! Faith without works is dead (James 1:17). Fruit of the Holy Spirit grow and flow from fellowship with God. A living faith results in living works. A dead faith results in dead works. Dead works are good deeds that we do in our own strength. Such deeds will wear us

out eventually but have no saving merit or eternal result.

This should challenge us to expand our thinking about works! It is possible even for a Christian to do what look like “good works” apart from abiding in Christ. Works that are done without motivated by the love of God are dead works. Works that are done in our own strength apart from walking in the Spirit are dead works. Such a realization should call us to abide in the Lord every moment of every day, not to ask Him to bless *our* thoughts, words and actions but so *He* might think, speak and act *in* us and *through* us. Simply put, our lives are intended to be the overflow of communion with God.

Take an honest look. Is your life marked by dead works or living works?

A spiritual turnaround requires the recognition of:

Dead Works

Repentance



A young man named John received a parrot as a gift. The parrot had a bad attitude and an even worse vocabulary. Every word out of the bird’s mouth was rude, obnoxious and laced with profanity.

John tried and tried to change the bird’s attitude by consistently saying only polite words, playing soft music and anything else he could think of to “clean up” the bird’s vocabulary. Finally, John was fed up and he yelled at the parrot. The parrot yelled back. John shook the parrot and the parrot got angrier and even ruder.

John, in desperation, threw up his hands, grabbed the bird and put him in the freezer. For a few minutes the parrot squawked and kicked and screamed. Then suddenly there was total quiet. Not a peep was heard for over a minute. Fearing that he’d hurt the parrot, John quickly opened the door to the freezer.

The parrot calmly stepped out onto John’s outstretched arms and said, “I believe I may have offended you with my rude language and actions. I’m sincerely remorseful for my inappropriate transgressions and I fully intend to do everything I can to correct my rude and unforgivable behaviour.”

John was stunned at the change in the bird’s attitude. As he was about to ask the parrot what had made such a dramatic change in his behaviour, the bird

continued, “May I ask what the turkey did?”

Repentance comes from a compound word, the Greek word *metanoias*. “Meta” means “to change” and “nous” means “mind” so it literally means “to change one’s mind”. To repent is to be going one way then to change your mind, turn around 180 degrees and head the opposite direction.

Gordon MacDonald explains:

“Repentance” is not basically a religious word. It comes from a culture where people were essentially nomadic and lived in a world with no maps or street signs. It’s easy to get lost walking through the desert. You become aware that the country side is strange. You finally say to yourself, I’m going in the wrong direction. That’s the first act of repentance. The second act of repentance is to go in an alternate direction. It implies that you not only do this but you admit it to your companions.

I have often heard our GPS tell me, “Turn around when possible.” It’s one thing to look at a map and have a general direction in my head as I get behind the wheel. It’s another thing to hear and obey the turn-by-turn directions of my navigation device. There have been times when my navigation device has been wrong. There have been times when I have been wrong and I’ve had to turn around. When it comes to life, you and I are called to trust the voice of the Holy Spirit when He says, “This is the way, walk in it” (Isaiah 30:21).

This might seem obvious but if we don’t recognize we are going the wrong way then we will not entertain the thought of turning around. Repentance comes only after we recognize the futility of our ways. King David tried to hide his sins of adultery and murder for about a year. Eventually, the Lord called Nathan the prophet to confront David. Fortunately, David responded with repentance so he could write Psalm 32:1-5:

1 Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. 2 Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. 3 When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. 4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Selah 5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord" — and you forgave the guilt of my sin. NIV

Repentance, or turning from sin whether we think it is big or small, is the key to a close relationship with the holy, sinless God. Our attitude toward the very character of our Lord is demonstrated by our attitude toward whatever violates His holy nature. The moment we ignore or downplay sin is the moment we grieve the Holy Spirit and we create distance. If God seems like a million miles away, He is not the one who has moved.

Confession and repentance go together like a knife and fork when it comes to relationships with the Lord and with other people. Let's admit that we all sin and we need a way back when we stumble and fall. This is why the Apostle John writes in 1 John 1:5-10:

5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. 8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. NIV

To confess is to say the same thing about sin that God says. It is to agree with the Holy One then to make a plan not to return to sin so we can fellowship or commune with Him and with the people in our lives. Relationship is built upon honesty and trust. Closeness results when we bear our hearts. Confession and repentance is the way back to intimacy.

Wabush, a town in a remote portion of Labrador was completely isolated for some time then a road was cut through the wilderness to reach it. Wabush now has one road leading into it, and thus, only one road leading out. If someone would travel the unpaved road for six to eight hours to get into Wabush, there is only way he or she could leave - by turning around.

Each of us, by birth, arrives in a town called Sin. As in Wabush, there is only one way out - a road built by God himself. But in order to take that road, one must first turn around. That complete about face is what the Bible calls repentance, and without it, there's no way out of town.

When was the last time you asked the Lord to forgive you for offending Him and for hurting someone else? How often do you make adjustments in your life?

A spiritual turnaround requires the recognition of:

Dead Works
Repentance

We must make a U-turn to find the road to life.

