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Luke 3 – 5

“The Evidence of Repentance”

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What defines a Christian? It's more than just a profession of faith in Jesus Christ or a belief system; it's a way of life. As a person lives out his/her life, what identifies him/her as a Christian? The answer is a simple one; it's about behavior. In our study today, John the Baptist¹ answers this question using an analogy of a fruit tree.

Before we take a look at the meaning of repentance, it would be helpful to know some of the background about the life of John the Baptist. It's interesting to note that of all the leaders in place at this time, God's Word comes to a man living in the desert! Malachi is the last of the recorded Old Testament prophets, although some see John the Baptist as the last Old Testament prophet, because he's the last prophet before the cross. Isaiah prophesied about John ([Isaiah 40:3-5](#)).

It was John's ministry and calling to do the work of preaching about sin and repentance, thus allowing Jesus to operate more in grace, although Jesus did deal with the need to repent from sin. John came before Jesus because conviction comes before conversion. There's no doubt that John is a different sort of man. In their gospels, Matthew and Mark describe him as a rather wooly character that dressed in camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey!

John's first recorded words were: *“You brood of vipers!”*² It's a sure thing that John was not particularly charming, but he was truthful. There's no doubt that his message about God's wrath being real and

¹ According to Luke 3:1, John the Baptist comes on the scene “[i]n the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.” Tiberius' reign began in 14AD, which means John's ministry started around 28-29AD. It's interesting to note that Luke includes six other leaders in power or positions of authority to give additional evidence of the exact time these things took place (Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, plus the high priests Annas (religious and rightful priest) and Caiaphas (political – He was Annas' son-in-law appointed by Rome).

² John didn't just call them snakes, he called them “baby snakes,” because it's believed he was referring to what is called Nicander's viper (a viper that the historian Nicander (2nd Century BC) wrote about as did Herodotus and others; seen on Egyptian hieroglyphics.) These snakes were particularly vicious. After mating, the female would bite off the head of the male, and her young would kill their mother by birthing themselves by eating their way out of her belly!

imminent left no question in the hearts and minds of his hearers. It's his message that the only way to avoid God's wrath is to repent, and the evidence of repentance is "good fruit." (Luke 3:8) Real repentance means to have a genuine sorrow over sin, accompanied by a change of heart and mind, which brings us to the focus of our study today: How can you tell if someone has really repented?

Real Repentance Is A Change Of Heart

1. Real repentance means to have a genuine sorrow over sin accompanied by a change of heart and mind; a reversal of direction.
2. Noah Webster's 1828 Dictionary of the English Language provides the following definitions.
 - a. Sorrow for any thing done or said; the pain or grief which a person experiences in consequence of the injury or inconvenience produced by his own conduct.
 - b. In theology, the pain, regret or affliction which a person feels on account of his past conduct, because it exposes him to punishment. This sorrow proceeding merely from the fear of punishment, is called legal repentance, as being excited by the terrors of legal penalties, and it may exist without an amendment of life.
 - c. Real penitence; sorrow or deep contrition for sin, as an offense and dishonor to God, a violation of his holy law, and the basest ingratitude towards a Being of infinite benevolence. This is called evangelical repentance, and is accompanied and followed by amendment of life.
 - d. Repentance is a change of mind, or a conversion from sin to God.
 - e. Repentance is the relinquishment of any practice, from conviction that it has offended God.
3. Claims of special status with God because of a Christian family heritage, or the disadvantage of having no Christian heritage are simply wrong.
 - a. It's not where you've come from that matters; it's where you're going!
 - b. It's not the root that matters; it's the fruit!

Real Repentance Is Evidenced By Good Fruit

4. The real Christian life happens in this particular order: Conviction – Conversion – Conduct.
 - a. So, if the conviction and the conversion are genuine, it follows that there should be a change in behavior.
5. **James 2:18** says, *"I will show you my faith by what I do."*
6. Good fruit is the evidence of a changed life.
7. The Holy Spirit will challenge the Christian about what is right.
 - a. **Philippians 2:13** – *"[F]or it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."*
 - b. **Luke 6:43–45** – *"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil*

man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.’”

- c. **Ephesians 5:8b-9** – *“Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth).”*
- d. **Galatians 5:22-23** – *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...”*
- e. **John 15:5** – *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”*

Discussion Questions

1. Review the introduction to the study guide with your group to provide the appropriate background.
2. Read **Luke 3:1-14** to provide an overview of today’s study.
3. What is the difference between remorse and repentance?
 - a. Is it true that remorse is just feeling sorry, or is there more to it than that?
 - b. Does true repentance mean that a person not only feels sorry but also makes a life-change?
4. Do you know people who live their life in such a way as to suggest that they have a special “deal” with God because they’re from a Christian family?
 - a. What are some of the ways that this sort of self-righteousness is lived out?
 - b. Why do some people think because they attend such-and-such church or denomination or follow the teachings of so-and-so, that he/she is a Christian?
 - c. Have you had a conversation with someone you’ve just met and you get the sense that they’re a believer, only to have them respond to the question, “You must be a Christian” by saying, “Yes, I’m a Baptist”?
 - i. What does this tell you about their understanding and personal experience with conviction and conversion?
5. Spend time discussing the roles of John the Baptist regarding the conviction of sin, and Jesus and the conversion from sin to God.
 - a. Was it your experience to fully recognize the conviction of the Holy Spirit before you prayed and made a profession of faith in Christ?
 - b. Do you think people understand the need to see their sin as God sees it?
 - c. Do you know people who’ve prayed to receive Christ because they were afraid of going to hell (some see this as getting fire insurance!) and not because they have really considered the magnitude of their sin?
 - i. Did they demonstrate the fruit of repentance?
 - ii. Where are they today in their relationship with the Lord?
 - d. If someone was to pray a prayer and not know the reality of conviction for sin, do you think that person has experienced a true conversion?

6. Spend time reading and discussing each of the ways John the Baptist encouraged his hearers to demonstrate good fruit by appealing to their moral conscience.
 - a. [Luke 3:11](#) – To the crowds – Be generous
 - b. [Luke 3:13](#) – To the tax collectors – Be honest
 - c. [Luke 3:14](#) – To some soldiers (likely soldiers in the Jewish Temple guard) – Be content with your pay
7. Read and briefly discuss each “*fruit of the Spirit*” in [Galatians 5:22–23](#).
8. Close your time by allowing everyone in your group to: search their heart to see if they have really understood the order of conviction, conversion and conduct; there may be someone in your group who has not recognized real conviction for sin, so it’s possible they may not have experienced true conversion (be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and be ready to lead that person in prayer); search their heart to see whether or not their life demonstrates a discernable change in conduct and to rejoice if it does, and determine to change if it does not; (select someone to read this Scripture) reflect on [John 15:5](#) and resolve to allow the Holy Spirit to lead them into a greater witness so they would “*bear much fruit.*”