

Evidence of Repentance

Luke 3:4-14

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Summary: As John the Baptist begins to share his message with the world, he gives the way of salvation to many different groups of people. In the process, he gives us the keys to demonstrating a life of genuine repentance and helps us see what living a life to glorify God looks like.

Benjamin Franklin is one of the most well-known names in American history—a founding father, author, inventor, and developer of so many things. His inventions range from the lightning rod, to bifocals, to the Franklin stove, to the flexible urinary catheter—you probably didn't know (or want to know) about that!

At the age of 65, he wrote his autobiography and explained his aversion to organized religion as somewhat tedious and unnecessary.

Still, he kept his membership in the Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia by paying annual membership dues, though rarely attending.

Instead, he developed what he called “a code of virtues.” He wrote, “I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection.” Franklin determined, he wrote, to imitate Jesus and Socrates

by following 13 virtues necessary for moral living.

He carried a small notebook with him, each page had been marked at the top with one of these virtues—which included temperance and cleanliness, humility and frugality. He would mark on that particular page every time he failed to keep one of these virtues and would determine to do better the next day.

When Franklin was around 35 years old, he met the young evangelist George Whitfield, who had come to America to preach.

They became friends, and Whitefield's own biography of more than 1,000 pages, which I have carefully read, revealed that Whitefield often gave the gospel to Franklin—that it was not the work of moral effort, but the work of Christ who died for sinners.

Franklin disregarded it all—although he would come to hear Whitefield preach in the open air, not so much to hear the message, but to calculate how many people could hear Whitefield’s voice. While he contributed often to Whitefield’s orphanage, but never listened to Whitefield’s message.



Do you have a Benjamin Franklin figure in your life? Is there a friend of yours, who you have tried to share the gospel with many times, but they refuse to hear it?

Over time, while Benjamin Franklin pursued his list of virtues, his immoral lifestyle in Europe became so well-known they sang songs about it in France. He would even have an illegitimate son back in this country, whom his faithful wife raised as her own.

More than 200 years after Benjamin Franklin died, a letter he wrote, which had been kept out of view by his estate became public, where he instructed a younger man on how to choose a mistress.

All the while carrying and marking his little book of virtues.

His letter would be cited in the 1980s as our Federal Courts began overturning obscenity laws. And our courts opened the doors, in many ways, to allow our

culture and our media to embrace and promote terrible wickedness.

In other words, if Benjamin Franklin can write literature like that and live like that, so can everybody else.

Had you met him on the street and asked him if he was right with God, if he needed to repent of anything, he would have defended his life—which he did to Whitefield—by showing you his little book of virtues. And by the way, chastity was one of his 13 virtues, but he cleverly rewrote it so that it only forbade doing something that would hurt someone else’s reputation.

Without a doubt, the greatest obstacle to genuine repentance is a self-confident, self-enamored, self-defending heart.

And that happens to be the perfect description for a world in need of a Savior; that’s a description of you and me as well, without Christ.

Self-assured, self-confident, self-enamored, and entirely self-deceived.

Frankly, that’s a description of lost mankind in every generation, and it’s also the audience, you discover, of an Old Testament prophet named John.

After 400 years of virtual silence from God, John shows up in his camel-hair robe with a leather belt around his waist and locusts and honey more than likely sticking to his beard.

He arrives like a whirlwind and is about to tell everyone who they really are. Whether

they are carrying a notebook or not, he will tell them the truth.

We find his ministry prophesied in **Luke's Gospel, where we left off in chapter 3—turn there.**

John the Baptizer is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy concerning the forerunner—the advance man—of the Messiah. His job description is spelled out here, beginning in **verse 4:**

As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

Make His paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall become straight,

and the rough places shall become level ways,

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Luke 3:4-6

John was like the ancient messenger or herald who went in advance of the royal procession to make sure the roads were clear and ready for the king. Spiritually

speaking, Israel was living in a wilderness of religion and rules and notebooks, yet they lived unrepentant, hypocritical lives.

Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate: Luke 1-13* (Victor Books, 1989), p. 37

It was John's job to clear the roadway of spiritual debris—to address the moral roadblocks and lead the people to genuine repentance in preparation for the Messiah.

Bruce B. Barton, *Life Application Bible: Luke* (Tyndale, 1997), p. 65

So this is the prophetic imagery: build a roadway so that the King can drive directly into your heart and life.

Yesterday morning, I drove out early to a favorite spot of mine for devotions; it's called Bojangles! I once again passed the site where interstate 540 is being built. This huge construction site amazes me—the clearing of trees, the massive movement of soil to cut down one hill and fill up a nearby valley, the water retention and erosion control systems put in place.

As I drove along the road, I couldn't help but sympathize with neighbors in the area. They didn't have a long time to find out it was coming; what they thought was their front yard is now cleared and made ready for the coming highway.

That's the idea here.

Get ready to have everything uprooted and overturned and demolished and relocated and changed.



How has your life been drastically changed as a result of your faith in God?
How was that change worth it?

King Jesus isn't into minor renovations; He doesn't do touchups; He's into major excavation and transformation.

That's why repentance was the theme of John's message. "You better be ready to have your lives turned completely around," John effectively says.

Now you can imagine the sensation, the stir, the excitement. After 400 years, a prophet has arrived.

And immediately, **verse 7** tells us, great crowds came out to show their interest in his message of repentance.

But can you imagine any preacher or evangelist today following John's methods?

Here comes this massive crowd and John begins his sermon by saying to them, in **verse 7**:

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

Luke 3:7b

How's that for a sermon opener? "You are a bunch of snakes! Why are you slithering out here to me?"

How's that for making unbelievers feel comfortable? How's that for politically correct, listener-friendly messaging?



What parts of the gospel can be difficult to share? What parts are not "politically correct" or easy to tell someone who doesn't believe?

But won't people get upset with that kind of opening, that kind of preaching? I mean, it sounds so judgmental—it will make these people feel guilty.

It will—because the gospel announces that we are indeed guilty!

Five years ago, I clipped this article and put it in my files—it got lost in there. It was written by the president of Oklahoma Wesleyan University after a student complained to him that the chaplain had preached a convicting message in chapel.

The message from I Corinthians 13 was on the subject of love, and this student complained that it had made him feel badly for not being loving. But instead of confessing, he complained that he had been victimized by the sermon and that he and his peers had been made to feel uncomfortable.

This president responded by writing—and I quote: "That feeling of discomfort you

have after listening to a sermon is called a conscience. The goal of many a good sermon is to get you to confess your sin—not coddle you in your selfishness.

So, here's my advice: if you're more interested in playing the 'hater' card than you are in confessing your own hate; if you want to lecture instead of learn; if you don't want to feel guilt in your soul when you are guilty of sin; if you want to be enabled rather than confronted, there are many universities that will give you exactly what you want, but we're not one of them.

We want to teach you to be selfless rather than selfish; we want you to model interpersonal reconciliation rather than foment personal conflict. Our university is a place to learn that life isn't about you; that the bad feelings you have while listening to a sermon is called guilt; that the way to address guilt is to repent. This is a place where we want you to learn quickly that you need to grow up.

This is not a day care—this is a university.”

Adapted excerpt from Everett Piper, *Not a Day Care* (Salem Books, 2017)

Well, let me tell you something, with that kind of vocabulary, John the prophet essentially told this crowd, “I'm not taking you to daycare, I'm getting you ready for the kingdom of God.”

And the way to get ready is to repent!

Now in ***Matthew's Gospel***, we're told that John specifically looked at the religious leaders when he said that, but

he certainly delivered the warning to the entire crowd.

Many of them were insincere—they just didn't want to miss the action. This place was hopping with the latest sensation, and John was the “new thing.”

Now when John refers to them here as vipers, he's using an Old Testament figure that referred to God's enemies. The figure of poisonous snakes was used to refer to Israel's enemies—the Egyptians and the Philistines were called serpents (***Jeremiah 46:22, Isaiah 14:29***).

Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: Volume 1* (Baker Academic, 1994), p. 303

So rather than call them all sons of Abraham—the people of God—John essentially calls them unbelievers at war with God.

Like snakes during a brush fire, they have come out of holes in the ground and are slithering along the ground to escape the fire.

In other words, they have no desire to change anything about their lives—they just want a little fire insurance so they can keep playing with matches.

Like one author who wrote, “When I served in the military, I had an army buddy who wore around his neck three different medals: a Catholic saint's medal, a Protestant cross and a Jewish star of David. When I asked him about it, he told me, “I'm not taking any chances; I've got my bases covered.”

Bruce Larson, *The Communicator's Commentary: Luke* (Word Books, 1983), p. 72

Repentance doesn't try to cover all the bases; repentance admits that before God nothing is hidden.

Jesus will later preach in Luke chapter 12 that at the final judgment of all the unbelieving world, ***there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed; there is nothing hidden that will not be known. (Luke 12:2).***

Repentance takes the cover off all your sin, instead of trying to pull the wool over God's eyes,

Here's what John said in **verse 7 again**:

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance."

Luke 3:7b-8a

In other words, if you really are people who belong to God, start living like it; if you really are repentant, how about showing some evidence of your repentance.

Notice further in **verse 8**:

"And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear

good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Luke 3:8b-9

The imagery of fire here is a reference to the coming judgment and hellfire for the unrepentant.

Now don't misunderstand—you can't avoid hell by doing good works. John is not saying that salvation is by faith plus good works; no, salvation is by faith proven by good works.

Now the religious leaders had been teaching the nation that they really didn't need faith or good works; all they needed was to be descendant of Abraham—a member of the Jewish nation.

They didn't even need to keep a notebook.

They were being taught that anybody who was a descendant of Abraham was safe from judgment.

William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 33

John says here—did you notice: ***Do not begin to say to yourselves***—literally, "don't even let the thought cross your mind, 'well I have Abraham as my father.'"

My friend, you do not get into the family of God by your blood line; you get in by following the Messiah who shed His blood for you.



Have you trusted in the blood of Jesus for your salvation, or are you still trusting in your heritage, works or good deeds?

You don't inherit eternal life from your parents, or your grandparents; you inherit it by grace through faith in Jesus.

Adapted from Bock, p. 305

No doubt, this message here was highly offensive. Get this here: John is placing the Jewish people on the same level as the Gentiles.

And we really can't imagine the explosion his words created here. This crowd was likely filled with people who, for the most part, had come out to John, carrying with them their little notebooks of virtue, saying, "Hey John, would you sign my book and tell me I'm okay!"

But some of them are now ready to listen, and Luke summarizes for us the response of three groups of people.

Start Sharing

The first group is the crowd at large;
verse 10:

*And the crowds asked him,
"What then shall we do?"
And he answered them,
"Whoever has two tunics is
to share with him who has*

*none, and whoever has
food is to do likewise."*

Luke 3:10-11

Now you might think that this is no big deal. Give you tunic (literally a t-shirt worn underneath the outer robe) away. No big deal. Well, for us maybe, but not if you only have one, which most people here did. But if you have two, give one of your t-shirts away.

Oh, and share your food. Without refrigerators to store food, families in Israel likely only kept enough food for each day at a time. John is essentially saying, "Invite someone poor and desperate to your home today for supper."

But what I love about this is John's completely surprising answer. You would expect the prophet to tell the people to give the evidence of their repentance by doing something:

- Penitential—go do a pilgrimage; walk a mile on your knees to some sacred spot.
- Or do something ecclesiastical—go join the synagogue and never miss another Sabbath service.
- Or do something devotional—start praying through the Psalms and memorize the Book of Numbers, that will prove you mean it.
- Or do something educational—join a rabbinical school and becoming a prophet like me!

None of that—it wasn't penitential, ecclesiastical, devotional or educational. John's challenge was ethical.

Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: Volume One* (Crossway, 1998), p. 113

Stop keeping all your stuff to yourselves and start sharing!

And to the next group, John tells them to stop stealing:

Stop stealing

Notice verse 12:

Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do."

Luke 3:12-13

Now we could spend a lot of time on the system in place here surrounding collecting taxes, and we may deal with it more later when Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector to follow Him.

For now, at least, I will say that the Roman Empire had created a system for taxation called tax farming. They gave the right to collect taxes, most often, to wealthy Roman families who paid for franchise, or bribed local government for the opportunity. They, in turn, hired tax collectors who taxed the amount required, then added whatever their boss's cut was, and then added their own little amount to skim off the top.

Edited from Bock, p. 310

It was a legitimate occupation that had been thoroughly corrupted by greed.

Lucian, a writer who lived about 100 years after Luke, wrote that the worst of society was composed of informers, adulterers, pimps and tax collectors.

Ibid, p. 312

Tax collectors were among the most despised people groups on the planet.

So, what do they do? And again, John gives this surprising advice: simply, stop stealing

He doesn't tell them to quit their jobs and become tax auditors. That would be a switch. He doesn't tell them to give 10% of what they skim off to the local orphanage.

No, keep your jobs, but from now on, bring God to work with you. Make Him your boss! Become known for honesty.

Finally, the third group are **soldiers**. And they are told to stop something *and* start something.

First, they are told to stop abusing people with their power.

Stop Abuse of Power

Verse 14:

Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation."

Luke 3:14a

These are essentially military police; they work for Rome but are assigned to keep the Jewish people in line.

Do not extort money from anyone by threats. The word for *threats* is a reference literally, “to shaking someone.” We use the expression to this day of “shaking someone down.”

Ibid, p. 313

You want to get money out of someone, so you shake them down—you threaten them; you push them around. Maybe you even beat them up if they won’t pay you for protection. They had essentially created a mafia in Jerusalem.

Added to that is the comment of *extorting money by making false accusation*. That means these soldiers would make a false arrest if they weren’t given some money. They might put some drugs in the guy’s saddle bag on his donkey and frame him.

Add to all of this the fact that a soldier in the first century had the right to demand room and board wherever he wanted; he could basically move in and take the master bedroom and if you made a fuss about it, he could make life impossible for you.

Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Luke* (Zondervan, 2012), p. 89

John cuts right to the heart and motive of these men, and he doesn’t bat an eye as he looks at these rough, battle worn, intimidating soldiers and points a prophetic finger in their face and says, “Stop pushing people around.”

And again, John doesn’t tell these soldiers to quit their jobs; he doesn’t tell them to go to the synagogue and join the choir or volunteer to work in the nursery; no, he tells them to go back to their posts—to stay soldiers—but start treating people with kindness.

In these days, a kind soldier would be as impossible to imagine as an honest tax collector.

It wouldn’t take long before the city would be revolutionized by people who repented.

It will be soon be so obvious who belongs to God!

Now John adds here that the soldiers won’t be able to pull this off unless they change their attitude about their paycheck—notice he adds here in **verse 14b**:

Be Satisfied With Your Salary

“And be content with your wages.”

Luke 3:14b

That’s right, be satisfied with your salary.

Now all of these evidences of repentance would apply to everyone: the crowd, the tax collectors and the soldiers.

Start sharing.

Stop stealing.

Stop abusing others.

Start living within your means and enjoying what God has provided for you.

Repentance is godliness in action.

Now let's bring it here to our own lives. How would John's verdict apply to us today?

He told the crowd to start sharing. I wonder: if somebody looked at your bank balance and monthly expenditures, would they uncover a priority for the work of God?

What have you given away to those in need?

How about the tax collectors?

If someone secretly watched you in the workplace and listened in on your personal interactions, would they be convinced of your honesty?

What's on your tax returns? What's on your computer screen or smart phone? What's the fine print on the contract you are getting that guy to sign?

And what about the soldiers?

Well, if someone observed your treatment of others, would they be struck by your kindness?

If I could summarize this paragraph with one more question for us today, it would be this:

If you were taken to court and accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

If the prophet John were to preach to you today, what would your response be to his call to repentance? If he preached to you, where would you stand?

Well, the prophet John did preach to you today—all I did was expound on his sermon manuscript and explain what he said and what he meant.

So, what will you say to the prophet John today? Are we listening to his message of repentance or will we hang on to our little notebook of self-assurance, and self-justification and self-deception?

Benjamin Franklin never listened to George Whitefield. Even though thousands of people trusted Christ through Whitefield's preaching during the Great Awakening of the 18th century, Franklin remained unmoved.

He had his notebook, and his private life was his own.

A few years after the death of George Whitefield, a 74-year-old Benjamin Franklin wrote this note in his diary about their friendship, and I quote: "Ours was a mere civil friendship, sincere on both sides, and lasted until his death. Mr. Whitefield used to pray for my conversion, but he never had the satisfaction that his prayers were heard."

Dallimore, p. 440

How eternally tragic that is.

He refused to hear the message of God, but what about you today?

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