

The Fruits of Repentance

Scripture: Luke 3:10–14; Acts 26:19–20; James 2:26

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What kind of evidence substantiates authentic repentance? When the crowds asked that question of John the Baptist in Luke 3:10, he told them to share with their needy neighbors (Luke 3:11). To tax collectors he said, “Collect no more than what you have been ordered to” (Luke 3:13). To soldiers he said, “Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages” (Luke 3:14).

In each case, he was calling for a selfless attitude and kindness to one’s neighbors. That short list doesn’t exhaust all the possible fruits of repentance, of course, but it demonstrates that genuine repentance ought to produce the kind of character change that results in a qualitative difference in the way we live. James wrote, “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). In a similar way, *repentance* that doesn’t produce works is barren and useless. A person who has genuinely repented is never left unchanged.

The apostle Paul likewise looked for proof of repentance. “I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision,” he said, “but kept declaring... to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, *performing deeds appropriate to repentance*” (Acts 26:19-20, emphasis added).

The emphasis on self-examination is consistent throughout Scripture. Because true repentance is one of the first indications of salvation, believers can and should look to the fruit of repentance for assurance. As Paul said, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Scripture presents self-examination as an essential prerequisite for authentic assurance (2 Corinthians 13:5). The evidences of true salvation cited in Scripture include the fruits of one’s behavior (1 John 3:18-19), pattern of life (1 John 3:24), and way of thinking (1 John 5:1-2).

Don’t be misled: salvation is in no way merited by our works, and therefore true assurance is not ultimately grounded in our performance. Self-examination can destroy false assurance, but you’ll never find settled assurance merely by looking at yourself. In the end, we have to look away from ourselves and rest in the objective promises of God’s Word. True, lasting assurance is anchored in the promise of salvation to all who believe. That promise is as true as God Himself and needs no empirical verification.

Still, self-examination is a necessary and biblical aspect of *gaining* assurance. It is the process by which we evaluate the quality of our own faith. And the fruits of repentance are the evidence we must seek.

This is especially crucial in the contemporary evangelical environment. Multitudes believe they are saved merely because someone told them so after a cursory conversation, the simple reciting of a canned prayer, the raising of a hand in a public meeting, or sometimes even less. People have not

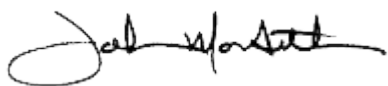
been challenged to examine themselves. Rarely do they test their assurance by God's Word. As a matter of fact, many have been taught that doubts about their salvation can only be detrimental to spiritual health and growth.

But Scripture *demand*s self-examination. In fact, we're supposed to examine ourselves regularly, every time we partake of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:28). Paul's famous challenge to the believers at Corinth clearly has the doctrine of assurance in view: "Test yourselves *to see if you are in the faith*; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?" (2 Corinthians 13:5 emphasis added). And Hebrews 10:22 indicates that "full assurance of faith" comes from "having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience."

So we need to examine ourselves in the process of coming to grips with assurance. Nowhere is this made more plain in Scripture than 1 John, one of the key passages of Scripture on the subject of assurance. In fact, the epistle was written with the express purpose of building the assurance of true believers. John wrote, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). His aim is to deepen the assurance of genuine Christians—those "who believe in the name of the Son of God." He's not trying to provoke doubts in the presence of authentic faith; he is giving us a basis to "assure our heart before Him" (1 John 3:19).

Notice again, however, that our *faith in Christ* is the ultimate ground and foundation of true assurance. Self-examination is simply the process by which we examine whether our faith is genuine and our repentance real.

True believers should not be unnerved by the biblical call to self-examination. Unbelievers and mere hearers of the Word, on the other hand, *need* to have their self-confidence shaken. So the apostle John names several practical tests that may be used to determine the authenticity of faith—including such things as obedience (1 John 2:3-6; 3:1-10), sound doctrine (1 John 2:21-28; 4:1-6), and love for the brethren (1 John 3:14-19; 4:7-11). Those are fruits of true repentance.



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