

Study Guide: The Hard Work of Preparation

Study Questions:

1. John's message begins with "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." How would you explain the connection between repentance and preparing for God's kingdom to someone who is unfamiliar with these concepts?
2. John called out both the crowds and religious leaders, saying everyone needs to repent. Why do you think it's sometimes easier to see the need for repentance in others rather than ourselves?
3. The passage discusses how some Jews relied on their heritage for salvation. What are some modern equivalents of this thinking in today's church? What do people sometimes rely on instead of genuine repentance?
4. In the sermon, Tom stated that repentance shifts our focus from ourselves to others. Can you describe a time when genuine repentance led you to change how you treated others?
5. What is the difference between John's baptism of repentance and the Christian baptism practiced today? Why is this distinction important?
6. The passage warns against relying on ancestral faith or cultural Christianity. What are some ways people might fall into this trap today?
7. When the crowds asked, "What should we do?", John gave very practical examples. What made these examples particularly challenging for their specific audiences?
8. The text emphasizes that true repentance produces fruit. What's the difference between feeling guilty and experiencing genuine repentance?
9. Why does John specifically address generosity and ethical behavior as evidence of repentance rather than just religious activities?

Personal Applications:

1. Daily Reflection Practice

- Create a daily habit of examining your actions and attitudes, specifically looking for areas where you might be prioritizing self over others.
- Set aside 10 minutes each evening to pray through the areas of selfishness, pride, greed, judgment, arrogance, and unforgiveness mentioned in the text.

2. Tangible Generosity Plan

- Following John's practical examples, identify three specific ways you can share your resources this week.
- This might mean decluttering your closet to donate clothes, setting aside a portion of your grocery budget to help someone in need, or adjusting your business practices to be more generous with employees or clients.

3. Relationship Restoration

- Choose one relationship where you need to demonstrate the fruit of repentance.
- Write down concrete steps you'll take to make things right, whether that involves making amends, changing your behavior, or showing greater care for that person's needs.

4. Relationship-Based Growth

- Select one spiritual discipline or "rule" you struggle with and examine how understanding God's loving relationship with you might transform your approach to it.
- Journal about how viewing this discipline through the lens of relationship changes your perspective.