

Luke 3:7-18

Professional athletes train intensely. Adults exercise often—or at least they try to. Kids practice and practice and practice. But why? Why the grueling routines, the strict diets, the late nights when sometimes you don't start homework until 7 o'clock? We do it for the goal, the target, the result we're hoping for. Professional athletes want to make it to the big dance, the Super Bowl, the World Series—and they want to win! Practice and exercise usually have a goal. Wouldn't it be depressing to work hard for absolutely no reason? Can you even imagine someone putting all the effort into exercising for nothing? Have you ever looked at your Christian life as a workout with goals? What if we viewed our time in worship as spiritual exercise and our time in the world as "Game Day"? John the Baptist wants us to think about what we do and why we do it. No part of our life escapes God's vision, so we want to prepare our hands for Jesus' coming. Today is the day! Get ready to act because **"Christians Exercise Regularly!" 1. By Living out our sincere repentance, and 2. By Looking to our Powerful Savior.**

1. By Living Out Our Sincere Repentance.

John the Baptist calls for repentance because he prepares the way for Jesus. He calls out to all people: turn from your sins and trust in your Savior God for forgiveness. No other message will do; no other message will change hearts. And John is seeing success! The crowds are coming out to be baptized by him. They heard about his outdoor worship service, and they were excited to check it out. But is John excited to see them coming? "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" Not exactly the cheery message we would open up our worship service with, is it?

John, by a miracle of God's Spirit, sees the hearts of these people. John sees that the people are not coming because they were sorry for their sins and trusting in God for forgiveness. The crowds were just going through the motions because their consciences had pricked them. They said to themselves, "Some judgment is coming, so I better do something... I guess the Messiah is coming soon and the Great Day of the LORD is on its way. John seems like an okay guy, maybe I'll get a baptism washing or something..." Their thinking was shallow and sinful.

John exposes shallow repentance because it makes our lives a lie. "It's Sunday morning, I *guess* I better be in church... Well, we've got kids now. Maybe we should get them some "religion"... My parents are making me go, so I'll show up—for now." Shallow thinking seems to run through our veins. It's the same thinking that ancient snake, the Devil, puts in our minds. It's the idea that God is pleased by a few outward, insincere religious observances. As if a spiritual exercise routine for us could even exist apart from trust in Christ! As if insincerity were good enough for God!

But John encourages the exercise remedy for the crowd, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance!" God has shown you and me the sadness of sin and brought us to confidence in Christ. This is his gift of new life. What now? How will we live? Do those works which show your repentant heart. Do those acts which say, 'yes I am sorry for my sins and I know Jesus forgives me!' **Live out your sincere repentance.** Make it a goal for your daily life in Christ!

Before John fills us in on the details, he wants to warn us against self-satisfaction. It's no secret that we often reach a level in life and we get comfortable. We tend to plateau at different points whether it's at our jobs or in our homes. As sinful human beings, we get comfortable with where we are in our spiritual lives too. So John warns us, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham." Don't think your past is a guarantee for your future. "My family has

been a long-line of Christians... My grandfather helped shape this congregation... I was baptized and confirmed here, and that's enough exercise for me..." Repentance shows up in our lives because our hearts and our hands are connected. **Christians exercise regularly** and we don't rely on our past accomplishments. We rely on Christ.

You may remember a bracelet fad which was going on a few years ago. Many people bought and wore bracelets with the initials WWJD on them, standing for What Would Jesus Do? But before Jesus began his ministry, the crowds here were already asking WWJD—what would John do? They want to know how to live and act in line with repentance. If the repentance of our hearts will show up in our hands, what should we do? What does it look like?

John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one with food should do the same." A tunic was your average T-shirt. Don't be afraid to give someone the shirt off your own back. Don't hesitate to share food with anyone who needs it. Jesus said it too, "If someone strikes you on your cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:29-31). It's about connecting your heart and your hands. Hearts in which Christ rules know how rich we truly are. We have the fullness of forgiveness, and so our hands overflow with giving. What should we do to live repentance? *Live for your neighbor!* Restore what has been broken by your sin, and don't be afraid to let your repentance show!

I want to tell you the story of Al Johnson. At the age of 19, Al had robbed a bank in Kansas with two other men. The case was closed after the other two criminals were killed in an auto accident and mistakenly identified as the only robbers. Al felt sure he was in the clear for good. He met and married a Christian woman and one day, at the age of 51, God gave him the gift of faith in Jesus. He realized how that sin of robbery still haunted him and he wanted to live his repentance. The statute of limitations had expired, but he didn't care. He paid back every cent of the money he had stolen. That's fruit in keeping with repentance!

Each one of us has a different set of opportunities to live out repentance. The tax collectors and the soldiers had different situations, but John told them to avoid those sins which are common and maybe even accepted in their line of work. What's the acceptable sin in your line of work? Is it stealing an extra hour at lunch time because everybody does it anyway? Is it working half-heartedly so that the boss doesn't give you an extra project before the weekend? John warns us that our lives are too short to treat sin lightly. The ax of judgment is at the root of the tree and every tree that doesn't bear fruit will be cut down.

2. By Looking to our Powerful Savior.

There's one thing about exercise we might not like: it is tiring. Maybe some of you experienced that fact after shoveling one, two, or three times this past week. John the Baptist knows regular Christian exercise can be tiring. Just when we think we are advancing in our Christians walk, we fall into a new sin or an all-too familiar sin. We take one step forward and then two steps backward. And the battle gets exhausting. So Christians need to be constantly recharged and refreshed. That leads us to the second part of **how Christians exercise, By looking to our powerful Savior!**

John must have been one awesome preacher. The crowds flocked to him, the religious leaders felt threatened by him, and even King Herod ended up throwing him in prison because John condemned Herod's marriage to his brother's wife. The people wondered and wanted John to be the Christ, the promised Messiah. They wanted him to be THE ONE, the one who would save them from Roman rule and help them. He seemed powerful, and so they wondered.

But John deflected any and all attention away from himself. John said he wasn't even worthy to be Jesus' slave and untie his sandals! John reminds us that the focus is not on us. If we focus on ourselves, we'll only be disappointed. We'll only see how we haven't truly and perfectly brought forth fruits of repentance. We'll get discouraged and disheartened.

Look to Jesus, he is the powerful One. John baptized with water, but Jesus has brought a fuller measure of the Holy Spirit. There is no difference between John's baptism and Jesus' baptism. Both bring the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit works in both. The difference comes in the gifts we have today. Ever since Pentecost, you and I enjoy unparalleled gifts from the Holy Spirit. Christ sent him to open our minds. The Spirit changes us. We see the Savior as the powerful conqueror he is—even though the world sees a weakling who died. Jesus conquered and won the forgiveness of sins for you and me. I am personally and powerfully forgiven by Christ. You are personally and powerfully forgiven by Christ. No one can take that gift from us. The Spirit constantly reminds us of Christ and his action. He lived, he died, he rose, he talks to the Father for you, he rules for you, he is powerful for you!

Christ is so powerful, he's unleashed us from ourselves and focusing on failure. If we were still tied to ourselves, life would be an exercise in futility. Nothing would matter, no one would matter—least of all our neighbor. But the Spirit and his purifying fire lead us to trust God's forgiveness and to live like it. **Looking to our powerful Savior** refreshes our souls. It's not about me!

Judgment is still the reality, though. Jesus has his powerful winnowing fork and he separates believers from unbelievers. He's already started to do this on earth as he gathers us into his body, the holy Christian Church. But he will ultimately complete his separating work on the Last Day, the Day of Judgment. By the work of the Holy Spirit this is something we look at differently too, because we know the Judge. He's our powerful Savior who shed his own blood for us. We have nothing to fear, Christ is near!

Physical exercise might not be something we all enjoy doing, and that's perfectly okay. Spiritual exercise is absolutely vital for you and me. **Christians exercise regularly** because without it our confidence in Christ is empty. We have heaven as our eternal goal. Christ has won it for us, make no mistake about that. But God wants us to live with that goal in mind, as we **live out our repentance**. You are God's children—live like it. Don't forget where our strength comes from: **our powerful Savior**, who is preparing a place for us. Amen.

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