

How to Distinguish a True Christian from a Hypocrite

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How can you tell whether you're a genuine believer or a false professor? One of the best books describing the true nature of conversion is *The Christian's Great Interest* by William Guthrie. The great Puritan theologian John Owen highly commended it and wrote, "The author [of *The Christian's Great Interest*] I take to have been one of the greatest divines that ever wrote; it is my Vade-mecum [that is, "handbook"], and I carry it and the Sedan New Testament, still about with me. I have written several folios, but there is more divinity in it than in them all."

Consider what William Guthrie says in chapter 5 of his book about the differences between the true Christian and the hypocrite. Here are some ways in which the hypocrite may be like the Christian.

1. A hypocrite may be influenced by the gospel in every part of himself. He may come to great knowledge of God's truth (Heb 6:4). His emotions about Christ may be high (Matt 13:20). He may even experience drastic changes in the outward man, like the Pharisee who prayed, "God, I thank You that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, etc." (Lk 18:11-12).
2. A hypocrite may look to others like he's a true believer. He might talk of the law and the gospel (Ps 50:16), openly confess his sin to his own shame (1 Sam 26:21), and humble himself in sackcloth (1 Kgs 21:27). He may even carefully consider what duties he needs to perform and seek after them (Is 58:2), persevere even in hard times, give his possessions away to God and the saints, or even give his body away to be burned (1 Cor 13:3).
3. A hypocrite may advance far in God's ordinary graces. He may come under great convictions of sin, just as Judas did (Matt 27:3-5). He may tremble at the word of God, just as Felix did (Acts 24:25), rejoice in receiving the truth (Matt 13:20), and have many experiences of tasting the good graces of God (Heb 6:4).

4. A hypocrite may have some characteristics very similar to the saving graces of the Holy Spirit. He may have a kind of faith, like Simon Magus who “believed also” (Acts 8:13) but then proved to be a false believer. He may have a kind of legal and outward repentance that looks very much like true repentance (Mal 3:14). He may have a great and powerful fear of God, like Balaam did (Num 22:18). He may experience a kind of hope (Job 8:13). The hypocrite may even have some love, as Herod had of John (Mk 6:26).

5. A hypocrite can even have great and powerful experiences of God. He may have “tasted of the heavenly gift” and become “partakers of the Holy Spirit” and experienced the “powers of the age to come” and yet not be genuinely converted.

So, what are the marks of a true believer? How is genuine conversion to be distinguished from false conversion? Guthrie provides five marks of a true believer that are not possessed by the hypocrite.

1. A true believer’s heart is changed forever. In Jeremiah 32:39 the Lord says, “I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me forever.” Hypocrites never have a changed nature. Hypocrites want Christ for the good that He might do them in the world. But a true believer’s heart loves Christ as the all-satisfying treasure of this life and the next.

2. A true believer’s changed life comes from a heart of love to Christ. Hypocrites can clean up their outward behavior to be seen by men, to ease their troubled consciences, or to keep themselves from the consequences of their sins. But true believers love Christ and keep His commandments for His sake, to serve Him, to know Him, and to bring glory to His name (Ps 119:6).

3. A true believer seeks Christ and His kingdom above all else. This is the one thing necessary: Christ’s friendship and fellowship. But that is never the “one thing” and heart-satisfying choice of the hypocrites. True believers, on the other hand, desire that this “better part would never be taken from them” (Lk 10:42).

4. A true believer submits to the righteousness of God. He abandons all hope in himself and his own righteousness, and rests wholly in the righteousness of Christ for his acceptance before God. A true believer rests in Christ and Him only as his

Savior. Hypocrites don't do this (Rom 10:3). They depend, in some degree, upon their own righteousness.

5. A true believer has the three great essentials of genuine Christianity. First, he is broken in heart and emptied of his own righteousness so as to loath himself (Lk 19:10). Second, he takes up Christ Jesus as the only treasure and jewel that can enrich and satisfy (Matt 13:44). Third, he sincerely closes with Christ's whole yoke without exception, judging all His "will just and good, holy and spiritual" (Rom 7:12). A hypocrite does none of these things.