

**Topic:**

Identifying True Believers

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## Identifying True Believers: An In-depth Study

The two primary marks of a true believer are *continuance* in Christ's word (obedience) and *chastening* by the Lord (i.e. discipline). See John 8:31; I John 2:19; Hebrew 12:5-12 cf. also Matthew 7:20; I John 3:9)

Remember: It is distinctly possible for people to make a *profession* of salvation without genuine *possession* of it. Jesus clearly taught that not everyone who said to Him 'Lord, Lord' would enter the kingdom of heaven. In fact, he said that many on Judgment Day would be shocked to learn that they were not authentic followers of Jesus. The issue in these cases is not whether these people lost their salvation, but that they never truly possessed it.

### Important points to consider

- All faith is not true saving faith. (see James 2:14)
- There will be superficial and temporary responses to the Word of God (see Matthew 13:1-9, 18:23).
- Profession of salvation does not always equal possession of salvation (see Matthew 7:15, 21-23). The Bible does not require us to accept as genuine every profession of faith.
- True faith produces fruit (i.e. good works) (see Matthew 7:15-20; 13:23; James 2:17; Ephesians 2:10). "The Lord will not save those whom He cannot command. He will not divide His offices. You cannot believe on a half-Christ. We take Him for what He is — the anointed Savior and Lord who is King of kings and Lord of all lords! He would not be who He is if He saved us and called us and chose us without the understanding that He can also guide and control our lives" (A.W. Tozer, pp. 18-19, *I Call It Heresy!*)
- The Scripture recognizes a distinction between temporary backsliding and actual abandonment of the faith. Peter's

### Five Desires of True Believers

1. To *please* God. (2 Corinthians 5:9)
2. To *know* God's Word. (1 Peter 2:1-2)
3. To *be with* God's people. (Heb. 10:25)
4. To *share* the gospel. (Matt. 28:18-20)
5. To *overcome* sin. (1 John 3:9)

denial of the Lord is the best example of this in the NT. (Luke 22:31-32 NASB or NIV). Thomas serves as another example see John 20).

- Although we cannot know a person's heart, specific scriptural measures of being a true believer should be applied.

### The following objective measures are provided for examination:

- The primary direction and characteristics of the person's life: I John 3:9 - "No one who is born of God practices sin . . ." Matthew 7:20 - "You will recognize them by their fruits".
- Works of the flesh vs. the Fruit of the Spirit. See Galatians 5:19-24.
- The wisdom from below vs. the wisdom from above. See James 3:12-18.
- The works of darkness vs. the fruit of the Light. See Ephesians 5:5-11.
- The unrighteous lifestyle. See I Corinthians 6:9-11.
- Love for the word vs. love of the Father. See I John 2:15-17.
- Love for other believers. See I John 3:14; 5:1.
- Keeping God's commandments. See I John 2:4, Titus 1:16.

If the overall direction and characteristics of a person's life is characterized by the negative categories above, the person does not have any firm reason to believe he is saved. Perhaps he hopes in a prayer of salvation, but if his life testifies against his profession, then Paul's words to the Corinthians are needed:

*"Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves" (II Corinthians 13:5).*

*"What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?" (James. 2:14).*

While it is distinctly possible for a true believer to commit the sins in the lists, the issue of each passage has to do with the primary emphasis of life (Romans 7:19; I John 2:1; II Peter 1:5-10). Ultimately, we must rest in II Timothy 2:19.

#### Some subjective measures:

- Most true apostates will have attitudes of defiance and rebellion (see: Hebrews 3:12-14). This is true except in the case of those whom Satan disguises (Matthew 7:15; II Corinthians 11:13-15).
- If an individual in question displays very little shame or sorrow in regard to sin, and very little desire for God and His Word, concerns should be raised (II Corinthians 7:10-11; I Peter 2:1-3).
- The person who openly practices sin without repentance should be encouraged not to claim identification with Christ (II Timothy 2:19b, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness")
- When we are trying to reach someone in question, it would be good to point her to the above *list* passages to prompt self-examination.

#### A closing question

If it is impossible for a true believer to ultimately fall away, why are serious warnings about the dangers of apostasy addressed to believers?

We must recognize how close someone can come toward salvation without ever genuinely receiving it. People can come into the Christian community and culturally adjust by learning acceptable practices and words, and yet deceive both themselves and the community as to the reality of their salvation.

The most fearful illustration of this is Judas. In John 13:21, Jesus revealed to the twelve that one of them would betray Him. According to John 13:22 the disciples were at a loss to know of which one He was speaking. Judas had so cunningly hidden his true identity that none of the others immediately thought of him. In fact, a parallel gospel informs us that, "each one began to say to Him, 'Surely not I, Lord?'" (Matthew 26:22)

How does our belief in the security of salvation and the perseverance of the saved, relate to the warnings about falling away and exhortations to continue in the faith (Heb. 3:13; Acts 14:22)? Shouldn't these warnings be unnecessary?

The following *seven suggested purposes* for these warning and exhortations prove helpful:

1. The warnings are directed to certain ones in the larger assemblies who were contemplating a return to Judaism (Hebrews 6:11-12; 10:32-35).
2. The warnings balance man's responsibility with the work of God-- thus bringing the whole matter into focus (cf. II Peter 1:10).
3. The warnings encourage healthy self-examination (eg. When Jesus reveals that one will betray Him)
4. The warnings serve a preventative purpose. They are instrumental as a divine means of keeping believers on the right path.
5. The warnings expose the ones who depart as being apostates (I John 2:19)
6. The warnings indicate the danger of the hardening effect of sinning against the light of God's revelation.
7. The warnings do not prove that a true believer can commit apostasy (cf. Hebrews 6:9-11; 10:39).

"Again, it is said that Scripture records several cases of actual apostasy (I Timothy 1:19,20; II Timothy 2:17,18; 4:10; II Peter 2:1,2; cf. Also Hebrews 6:4-6). But these instances do not prove the contention that real believers in possession of true saving faith, can fall from grace, unless it be shown first that the persons indicated in these passages had true faith in Christ, and not a mere temporal faith, which is not rooted in regeneration. The Bible teaches us that there are persons who profess the true faith, and yet are not of the faith" (L. Berkhof, p. 549, *Systematic Theology*).