Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Counterfeit Sanctification
Scripture: 1 Samuel 16:7
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by John MacArthur

Sanctification isn't easy—it takes faithfulness, hard work, and self-discipline. And even then, it's not purely a function of your will, but the work of the Holy Spirit in you. It's not manufactured overnight.

As with anything that takes time, effort, and patience, people are prone to look for shortcuts. Some people substitute a mystical, subjective feeling of closeness to God for actual spiritual growth. Others cling to outward expressions of godliness while sin still makes a home in their hearts.

But that's not true spiritual growth—it's counterfeit. If you truly love the Lord, you can't be willing to move the goalposts on biblical sanctification.

There are many varieties of counterfeit sanctification. Some are easier to spot than others, but all lead to the same kind of spiritual shipwreck. Here are a few to be on the lookout for in your own life.

Moral virtue can often pass for true spiritual growth. Some people, for varying reasons, are fair minded, loyal, kind, conscientious, hardworking, and generous. They can make it through life without scandals and outrageous immorality.

But morality alone isn't an accurate measure of a person's spiritual condition. Moral virtue can exist apart from sanctification—even apart from salvation. You've probably known nonbelievers who hold to a high moral standard, perhaps even higher than some believers. But their virtue isn't a substitute for saving faith. Outward morality doesn't always equate to inward transformation. True spiritual growth isn't just about good exteriors.

Another counterfeit of spiritual growth is **religious superstition**. Some believers methodically go through the motions of their daily Scripture reading, prayer times, and other practical spiritual disciplines as if the actions themselves merited God's favor and blessing. You even see this attitude in little things, like praying before a meal. It becomes a mindless, empty ritual instead of an opportunity to express real thanks and praise to God.

The Catholic faith is built on exactly those kinds of superstitious rituals. But just as lighting candles, sprinkling holy water, praying the rosary, and confessing your sins to a priest don't earn salvation, going through the motions of your Christian life—even fastidiously—cannot substitute for true spiritual

growth.

Restraint is another possible kind of counterfeit sanctification. People don’t always avoid sin in favor of righteousness—sometimes they’re simply afraid to face the consequences of sin. They don’t necessarily have a heart to obey God or His Word. They’re just afraid of pursuing temptation because of the results.

That fear could be the sign of a well-trained conscience. Maybe the person was raised in a Christian home and has built-in convictions about right and wrong. Maybe he grew up under the moral standard of God’s Word and can’t shake the nagging of his conscience. Rather than face a troubled conscience or the consequences of his sin, he’ll simply not do it.

Restraint from sin might eventually lead someone to true, saving faith. But on its own, it’s not an indication of God’s sanctifying work.

There’s one other category of counterfeit sanctification that we’ll call **false profession**. You’ve probably known people who parade their holiness and exhibit a kind of over-the-top, superficial religiosity. There are all kinds of ways to draw attention to yourself and your good behavior. But if you’re just putting on a show for others—if your outward holiness isn’t prompted by inward growth—then your holiness is phony.

Another example of false profession is the kind of subjective, mystical experience that’s emphasized by some in the spiritual formation movement. *Feeling* closer to God and more *in tune* with His Word is not an accurate measure of your sanctification. In fact, relying on those superficial emotions is a sure way to short-circuit the work of the Holy Spirit in your life, dulling your discernment and watering down your wisdom.

True sanctification isn’t about outward morality, religious observance, restraint from sin, superficial holiness, or your feelings (1 Samuel 16:7). It’s about growing in Christlikeness in all aspects of your life. Anything less is a counterfeit.

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