

False Faith

by Alistair Begg

The sermon emphasizes the importance of a genuine faith that is demonstrated by action and a commitment to following Christ, and warns against the dangers of false faith that is professed but not lived out.

Duration: 37:47

Topics: "False Faith"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the issue of people attending church services with little attention or affection. He explains that the reason for large crowds in arenas listening to preaching is because the message often tells people that they are great and okay. However, the preacher emphasizes that this is not the truth according to James. James warns against false professions of faith and highlights the importance of faith being accompanied by action. The preacher concludes by stating that the evidence of our acceptance by God is seen in the transformation of our lives through the work of Jesus.

Transcript

I invite you to turn to James and chapter 2. We'll read from verse 14 as we pick up our studies in this very practical and somewhat uncomfortable letter of James, at least so far. James chapter 2 and verse 14. What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.

If one of you says to him, go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. Father, as we turn to the Bible, what we know not teach us, what we have not give us, what we are not make us. For your son's sake.

Amen. Who would have thought that the 21st century would prove to be as dangerous as it is? At the end of the 20th century, with the absence of the Cold War, with the dismantling of certain nuclear threats, the word on certain people's lips was that we now have things under control, that there is no real need for further fear, and that we're going to tackle dangers in the streets as well as dangers in high places. Well, of course, none of that has proved to be the case.

The reverse has proved true, and in these opening seven years of a new millennium, we live in a world that is increasingly perilous. It is significantly tumultuous, and it is a mark of human existence that men and women's lives are as fearful as they are. If you simply Google 21st century dangers, you will be able

to spend the remainder of the day working your way through high-sounding academic papers and various dissertations related to the fact of these dangers.

The dangers that are part and parcel of terrorism, that confront us by the advances in technology, not least of all in the medical realm, which make it possible to extend life and therefore to give us the dilemma, ethical dilemmas, the fact of disease itself, the renewed threats of nuclear holocaust, as the major superpowers dismantle things and smaller powers avail themselves of them. Indeed, if one wasn't careful and didn't have a bible to read and didn't know that God was sovereign over the events of life, one might be tempted to curl up in a ball and simply relieve oneself of the pressures of daily life. But the reason I begin there is because as real as those dangers are, and as significant as those issues may be, all of them, individually or taken together, pale in comparison to the danger addressed by James in these verses.

What is that danger? It is this, the danger of having a faith that is false. Three times in the space of 13 verses, he makes it very, very clear. First of all, in verse 17, faith by itself is dead.

Verse 20, faith without deeds is useless. Verse 26, faith without deeds is dead. In other words, he sounds a warning note that has hints of Jesus' words in Matthew 7. You may recall that in Matthew 7, in the Sermon on the Mount, at one point Jesus says to those who are listening, not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

In other words, it is distinctly possible to be self-deceived. And to be self-deceived in the issue of faith is of eternal significance. James is not unique in this respect.

Other gospel writers, other writers of the New Testament letters do the same thing. For example, at the end of 2 Corinthians, you needn't turn to it, I'll read it for you. In 2 Corinthians 13, 5, Paul issues this great exhortation, examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.

Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you? Unless, of course, you fail the test. In other words, he doesn't simply assume that everyone who professes faith in Jesus has living faith in Jesus.

You say, well, that might not be very kind. In actual fact, it is exceptionally kind. What would be unkind is to have such a presumption and such an assumption as to sweep every false professor into the notion that because they have an interest in, an involvement with, faith at whatever level, they must somehow or another be part and parcel of God's forever kingdom.

Now, in the context of the opening chapter, and some of this is reaching back in order that we might set the context wider for ourselves as we return to our studies. It is some three months since we studied here James 2.13. But if you look at verse 22 of chapter one, James has reminded his readers that it is distinctly possible simply to listen to the word and so deceive themselves. The danger of self-deception by simply coming along and listening, whether it is listening to the teacher in the synagogue or whether it is listening to the one who brings the news of Jesus to bear upon their thinking.

And having made this distinction, he proceeds in verse 26 to address the individual who considers himself or herself as religious. If anyone considers himself religious, says James, and yet doesn't have a controlled tongue, remember, doesn't have a compassionate heart, doesn't have a clean life, then they might want to take the test again. Just to consider oneself within the framework is not sufficient.

And James, because he loves those to whom he writes, warns them of what is a clear and present danger. He also goes on to say that if you are a bunch of a paraphrase, but he says if you are a bunch of snobs, if you prefer people because of their color or their background or their intelligence or their wealth or the absence of the same, then you need to take the test all over again too. Because the fact that you consider yourself to be a religious person and yet there is no evidence of that religious expression in the life of God work out in your community, it demands that you face the danger.

Verse 14 of chapter 2, he's advancing the ball a little further. What good is it, he says, my brothers, it might be equally my brothers and sisters, what good is it, brothers and sisters, if any one of you claims to have faith, claims to have faith. This is very important that you read the Bible as it is there, and it helps you.

The King James, if you're using it, is confusing on this because it seems to be setting faith against deeds. That's not what he's doing. What good is it, my brother, if a man claims to have faith and has no deeds? Can such a faith save him? What kind of faith? A professed faith that is false.

Now, when I find myself in my study saying out loud false faith, I realized I've made a note to myself, make sure when you say that, that you articulate it as best you can, because it may come out wrongly. It would be easy for it to get jumbled on the way out. And it made me think of what it would be like to say false face if one had a lip, because false face comes out as false faith.

I see you have a false faith, a false face, if you have a lisp. This is not to embarrass anyone who has a lisp, it's just to let you into the way my mind works. And so I sat for a little while at my desk going false faith, but that's a false faith, not a false face, and so on.

But what it triggered for me was a recollection deep in my past. And that was at Halloween in Scotland, and please don't write to me about Halloween, but at Halloween in Scotland, we would go to the store and we would buy not a mask, but a false face. That's what we asked for.

And it was a little plastic face, maybe Mickey Mouse or Minnie Mouse or whatever it was, and it had an elastic band behind it, the two things. I'm sure it was the same here. And you wore that.

Now, no one thought for a moment that you were Mickey Mouse. You were seeking to conceal the reality of what was behind by the falsity of what was before. But everybody could tell there was no real reason for alarm.

But while that distinction is patently obvious and harmless, James is alerting his readers to a distinction that may not be so patently obvious and is actually incredibly harmful. He is addressing the possibility, the danger which is attached to that which closely resembles the real thing, but still is furious. It is fake.

It is false. It is dead. One of my friends in Michigan last year was so excited because he was going to the Chicago Bears to see them play in Chicago.

And although he and his English friend had no tickets for the game, they were delighted to let me know that they knew where to go in Chicago and you could find these tickets and really good ones even three hours before the game. And he proceeded to purchase tickets at significant cost, which gave him magnificent seats. He put them in his pocket and went to brunch.

And at brunch as they ate and looked forward to the game, they congratulated one another on how smart they were not to have gone through the routine channels, but to have been able to pick up these

magnificent tickets. When they presented them at the turnstile, the gentleman said, please come with me. And he took him into a side room and a policeman gave them the ninth degree on where they had purchased these tickets because they were false.

And there would be no entry into the stadium on their basis. Big deal. So you miss a football game.

But if you think, if I think that we can, as it were, present a false statement of faith at the entryway to heaven and have it accepted. We're not reading our Bibles. That's what makes this so significant.

That's why this danger is so real. I don't think there would be many in this congregation right now who are in danger of thinking that by certain good deeds that we might do, that we would find acceptance with God. We might be devoid of that danger.

And of course, that's good. But we may be dangerously unaware of the possibility of seeking to take refuge in a faith that is false. Thomas Manson, in an earlier generation, referred to it as that little something that looks like religion.

And he went on to describe the individual who appears in church at the summons of the bell to repeat words because others do the same, to hear what is delivered from the pulpit with little attention or affection, unless something occurs that is suited to exalt self or to soothe conscience, and then to run with eagerness back out the door and into the world again. It's amazingly up to date, isn't it? Here he is hundreds of years before saying, the thing that I'm facing in my congregation is this, that I have a vast crowd of people who come. Many of them listen with very little attention and very little affection.

The only way you can get them to listen, he says, is if you will exalt their self-esteem or if you will seek to soothe their conscience. In other words, in 21st century terms, if you will tell them that they're great and if you will tell them that they're okay. Why are there arenas this morning in the continental United States with 30,000 people in them listening to preaching? I'll tell you why.

Because the preaching says two things over and over again. You are great and you are okay. And James says, no you're not.

And if somebody tells you that you are, you better beware of that individual. Take the test, he says. What good is it if a man claims to have faith and there is no evidence in his life? Can that faith save him from hell? It's a rhetorical question and the answer is categorically, no it can't and no it won't.

You see why it's so dangerous to be in the place where the Bible is taught. Why it's so dangerous to be in a church where the pastors make an honest endeavor to teach the gospel, to explain that who Jesus is and what he has done is the basis of forgiveness and our only hope of heaven and to press upon men and women the need to trust in that Jesus. Do you realize that there is less significance in the opposition of a pagan than there is in the lostness of a false professor who has just a little something resembling the real thing? Now to quote Manton is to recognize that this is not a unique and pressing contemporary problem.

It's been true in every generation. The presence of people within the framework of the external church who profess to be believers but who are not genuine believers. And here in the United States we have vast numbers of individuals in inflated church memberships claiming that because they at some point in their life raised their hand or walked an aisle or trusted Christ, they are genuinely in Christ.

They have no interest in the Bible, no zeal for their unsaved friends and neighbors, no call to a holy life. In fact they are indiscriminately the same as their non-Christian friends. What does the Bible say about that? Well for example the writer of the Hebrews is very clear.

He says that God disciplines his children and he says if you are not disciplined then you're illegitimate children and not true children. Who's he writing to? He's writing to the framework of the church and he's saying to them you better make sure where you stand in relationship to these things. And James having listened so clearly to his brother Jesus on so many occasions initially without being a believer comes to the same issue himself.

But I think our contemporary circumstances add a little touch of lime to this one. When you think about what we are confronted with on a daily basis in the media. For example let me just give you three phrases that have become part of contemporary journalism in the first seven years of the 21st century.

Number one, faith-based initiatives. Nobody heard about that before. Faith-based initiatives.

The need we're told for everybody to have equal respect for every quote faith community and a preparedness to listen often without reservation to each person tell us about their faith journey. Now in one sense there is no reason for alarm in relationship to the phraseology but in every realistic sense if you listen carefully to what underlies it it is the notion that somehow or another even the use of the word faith whatever that faith might be faith in whom faith in what faith in faith itself in other words everything is validated on the basis of the notion of faith per se. That is not what the bible is talking about concerning faith here.

What James is talking about is saving faith. It is faith in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the faith which brings a man or a woman into the confidence that although I have no basis upon which to stand before God that because of what God has done in Jesus and because I have come by his grace to entrust myself to Jesus that it is this then which forms the basis of my acceptance with God and it is in my lifestyle that I give evidence of the basis for my faith.

When we study the end of Acts and we looked at Paul constantly defending the faith and finally going up before Agrippa in the presence of Festus and it does your heart good just to reread Paul defending the faith and all of these things before Festus and Agrippa and Felix and so on and it's in Acts 26 in case you want to read it for homework.

Paul is right in the in the midst of his expression of faith in Jesus and at this point Luke says Festus interrupted Paul's defense you're out of your mind Paul he shouted your great learning is driving you insane I'm not insane most excellent Festus Paul replied what I'm saying is true and reasonable and then he draws the king in he says the king probably pointing to him to Agrippa the king is familiar with these things and I can speak freely to him in other words Festus if you don't want to listen to this that's okay but I'm sure the king wants to listen to this I can speak freely to him I'm convinced that none of this has escaped his notice you know you may not be getting it Festus but I'm sure Agrippa is coming right along with me because none of it has been done in a corner and then

he addresses the king directly and he says king Agrippa do you believe the prophets I know you do and the king says do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to become a Christian see Agrippa understood exactly what Paul was saying Paul was not saying do you believe the prophets do you have some kind of faith that's terrific that's terrific maybe you could take some faith-based initiatives in

your kingdom you know maybe you could describe your faith journey to a few people at a garden party or something maybe maybe you could you could establish a little faith community no no Agrippa gets it clear I know what you're trying to do Paul you're trying to get me to believe in this Jesus of Nazareth and Paul says that's exactly what I'm trying to do why because there is no

saving faith outside of Jesus of Nazareth see it is entirely logical given the thesis and that's why James recognizes if I write to these people and they believe that simply because they're saying the same words singing the same songs doing the same things that some are another they're in the faith and they're not I will answer to God on the day of judgment their blood will be on my hands out of the prophets in the old testament or you say this is when are we getting to the conclusion the introduction is going on forever well soon well we have to address we have to make very very clear the nature of faith itself don't we because what is the primary act of faith what does it mean to have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ let me tell you what it isn't it is not the acceptance intellectually of

certain propositions about Jesus it includes the acceptance of those propositions about Jesus but the propositions about Jesus in and of themselves responded to intellectually do not equal saving faith saving faith is essentially the entrustment the entrustment of our lives to Jesus as Lord and Savior it is not the belief that we have been saved nor is it even the belief that Christ died for us but it is the commitment of ourselves to Christ as unsaved lost helpless and undone in order that we may be saved see all that we bring to our salvation is the sin from which we need to be forgiven we bring nothing in our hands we come and we say lost helpless undone and in need of a savior in the 60s they had those big beanbag chairs they've probably been resurrected by now you get the small ones

depending on your size or whether you had a girlfriend or not and then you get the larger ones and they were very inviting you can entrust yourself to them you just fall back into them I didn't ever see anybody make peculiar examinations of the physical properties of them but they just entrusted themselves to them and what James is referencing here is this that when a man or a woman entrusts themselves to the Lord Jesus when a man or a woman offloads their sin and discovers the forgiveness that Jesus brings not only does Jesus forgive their sin but he provides the Holy Spirit to live in our lives so that the grace of God Titus 2 that brings salvation teaches us to say no to all ungodliness and teaches us how to live life in a way that is pleasing to him and so what James is saying is

since there are these two dimensions to it what good is it if somebody just walks around saying I have faith I have faith and there is no evidence in their life can that faith save that's why it's very difficult you know for people in this kind of area to become Christians it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle and for a rich man or a rich woman to enter the kingdom of God because those of us who are rich have a hard time admitting that we're lost that we're undone that we're helpless and we have no way of providing for ourselves now let me say it and say it as clearly as I can do not mistake some general acknowledgement of God's existence or even the uniqueness of Jesus as being evidence of saving faith because if you look down at verse 19 to which will come another

day even the demons believe there is one God they do that and it makes them shudder now what you need to be doing is not simply assenting to the truth about Jesus but is also consenting to take Christ remember in Sunday school we learned it forsaking all I take I take him or forsaking all I trust him f-a-i-t-h forsaking all I trust him that's it that's it forsaking all all my good deeds all my best attempts all my everything forsaking all of that I trust him and when it happens we look back on our lives and we realize that verse 18 of chapter 1 summarizes it wonderfully for us he chose to give us birth that's God's initiative

through the word of truth that's his instrument that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created that's his intention and where this faith is real there

will be evidence there will be evidence we're not talking here about faultlessness we're not talking here about perfection we're not talking here necessarily about all of the plants in full bloom but we are talking here about the indication that there is life and the life reveals itself watch out said Jesus for false prophets they come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly they're ferocious wolves it's by their fruit you will recognize them do people pick grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles likewise every good tree bears good fruit a bad tree bears bad fruit a good tree can't bear bad fruit a bad tree can't bear good fruit every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire thus by their fruit you will recognize them and it is then that he says the

verse with which we began and not everyone who says to me lord lord will enter the heaven now one of the great benefits of these past months is the wonderful cards and letters and signs of encouragement and actually gifts my teddy bear collection is increasingly is enlarged in significant measure and i also received just gifts you would never imagine and i wanted to bring i brought one down this morning to show you this came from colorado and it's a very a very nice piece of wood and this is actually my wife's i haven't given it to her yet but i have i have a larger i have a larger one for myself it came uh marked mark six eight where jesus says um i don't take your purse with you just take only a staff uh when you go out and so you can you can look for sue at the mall she'll just be

walking around with this uh don't don't ask to borrow a credit card you simply have this with her you'll see me because i have one that's about this size it was made for goliath i think and it's going to have to be cut down but the reason when i saw it i said this is a perfect illustration it actually had a rubber band around it with something attached to it but but to look for any fruit on this is a profitless exercise right this is dead this is no good there are cherries on my kitchen counter i could have brought some of them and found a way to tie them on and uh said you know this is a wonderful these cherries grew on this and you would say uh probably your medication has not been working as well as you hope but if our lives look like this no matter what we say jesus says you just

throw it in the fire that's the jesus who died on the cross for people whose lives are so messed up that they needed a savior you can't have it you can't have it one way or the other you have to have it both ways the judgment of god is executed upon sin it will be punished that the mercy of god is revealed in jesus and he has borne the punishment of sin and james comes and says if your life looks like this i don't care what you say the man or woman claims to have faith and yet their life looks like this can such faith save that's why i say this is the great danger in the world the danger in the world is not terrorism the danger in the world is that you and i would die and go to hell that is the only thing you really need to fear and that let that fear drive you to jesus and jesus will

fill you with his spirit and enable you to become the person he wants you to be you see james is not saying if you will have a compassionate heart if you will have a controlled tongue if you will have a clean life then on the basis of that you can make yourself acceptable to god what he's saying is that when god comes to live within you he will he'll clean up your life he'll control your tongue he will produce compassion within you these will be the evidences what is the basis of our acceptance what jesus has done the evidence of our acceptance in these things you see the problem that james is addressing we got three minutes to go so the plane is now hurtling towards the ground but the problem that james addresses is not the problem of open opposition it's the problem of false profession

in many ways open opposition is a lot easier to handle isn't it you go out and somebody says church i couldn't stand church the bible i don't want to read the bible jesus i don't want to hear a thing about jesus well at least we've got clarity don't we so we've got good well let's have a conversation about this but what's most dangerous is the person who's sitting in there saying oh yes church for me absolutely yes well look at the questions he asks two questions what good is it if a man claims to have faith and has no deeds answer no good can such faith save answer no illustration what's his illustration well he says imagine that somebody is uh cold and hungry and one of you says i hope you have a great day keep warm and uh stay well fed but does nothing about his physical needs what

good is that no good at all that's patently obvious isn't it words in and of themselves cannot address hunger or the cold and so the logical conclusion in verse 17 a conclusion to which he's about to return but here we end he says in the same way faith by itself if it is not accompanied by action is dead professions of faith unaccompanied by the life that god produces in our lives is absolutely useless it's very blunt isn't it shocking it's an unavoidable challenge is my profession of faith real for it is says paul by grace that we are saved through faith and that not of ourselves is the gift of god not by works so that no one can boast for we are god's workmanship created in christ jesus to do good works for which god prepared which god prepared in advance for us to do we're not saved

by them we're saved for them or as luthers put it it is faith alone that saves but the faith that saves is not alone i urge you today if you are in any doubt about these things throw yourself back on jesus cast yourself on his mercy and ask him to produce fruit in your life he'll do it he promised but mere knowledge of this fact will not bring about the change for the last four months now take your medicine has become or have you taken your medicine has become a routine phrase around my house and susan has invited invented various ways for me to know whether i have or i haven't so that i can turn the bottles upside down when i've taken it so that when i come back in the bathroom i'll know that i've taken it except that when i come back in the bathroom i can't remember whether it was

upside down because i was supposed to take it or whatever it was and so i suppose i could just sit in the bathroom and look at it and believe it i believe that this will do this otherwise i trust the physician he told me that there would be there there would be a lasting benefit if i would take this but until i take it all of my intellectual assent unmatched by the entrustment of myself to the prescription you will not bring about any change i don't bring this word to you this morning because i believe that part site is full of false professors i bring it to you because it's the next four verses of james chapter two let's pray together father we thank you for the bible and we pray that we might become people of the bible that we might search the scriptures to see if these things are so

that we might become a congregation that is grateful as we are for those who teach us that we might listen to their words very carefully and pour them through the sieve of holy scripture so that we become those who are obedient to your word and not just because someone said so i pray for those who are uncertain about faith in jesus that they might come to trust in him as a savior and lord and king for those of us who are rattled by these things because our light is dimming and our attitudes are fading that these might be a spur and a goad to follow hard after christ to ask him to forgive us and to enable us to let our light so shine before men that they might see our good deeds and glorify you our father in heaven we thank you that all of our acceptance with you is an account of what

christ has accomplished and may grace of the lord jesus christ and the love of god our father and the fellowship of the holy spirit rest upon and remain with each of us now and forevermore amen that

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