

5 Signs of Dead Faith

Introduction. James is a realist about religion. He frequently presents dead, deficient, or false faith in contrast to the living faith demanded by God. James repeatedly warns his readers that verbal claims or religious self-assessments don't necessarily indicate one's true spiritual condition. To properly understand the category of living faith, one must also acknowledge and resist the category of dead faith.

Readers of the book of James are tempted to go straight to James 2:26 and assess that the defining feature of dead faith is the lack of works. While that's true, we're going to investigate five beliefs and behaviors embedded in James that ends in one of two ways — life or death. But remember as we go through the lesson that with confronting these signs comes the invitation to respond appropriately.

I. Superficial Hearing of God's Word

- A. James states that a person's self-deceived if he only listens to the Word of God but doesn't alter his behavior in response to that Word ([James 1:22-25](#)).
- B. The purpose of this analogy is to condemn superficial knowledge accompanied by lack of action.
 - 1. The world is filled with religious pretenders, and James repeatedly warns his recipients to not be found in that situation.
 - 2. The Word of God is incredibly effective, and will work as advertised if we'll only use it.
 - a) It anchors us in truth ([John 17:17](#)).
 - b) It saves us through the knowledge of Jesus ([Romans 1:16](#)).
 - c) It enlightens our path ([Psalm 119:105](#)).
 - d) It trains and equips us ([2 Timothy 3:16-17](#)).
 - e) It judges the desires and thoughts of our heart ([Hebrews 4:12](#)).

II. Habitual Sin in a Life

- A. We know that sickness can be the result of sin, but the teaching in James 5:13-16 for us (after the age of spiritual gifts) is that affliction and sickness provide occasion for meditation and recognition of sin.
 - 1. I understand the "prayer of faith" to be miraculous faith with a miraculous healing. After the age of spiritual gifts, we don't have that option available.
 - 2. However, we know that every good and perfect gift comes from God ([James 1:17](#)), so when we experience the blessing of providential healing we should be grateful and appreciative to God (cp. [2 Corinthians 12:7-10](#)).
- B. Encouraging confession and prayer for sins and restoration in the time of sickness and difficulty (or any other time) is a great and needed work. We take seriously the work of advocating for righteous attitudes and conduct:
 - 1. Be transformed in your mind ([Romans 12:2](#)).
 - 2. Take temptation seriously ([1 Corinthians 10:12](#)).
 - 3. Walk after the Spirit ([Galatians 5:16](#)).
 - 4. Put to death sin in your body ([Colossians 3:5](#)).
 - 5. Live soberly, righteously, and godly ([Titus 2:12](#)).

III. Prayers That Lack Faith

- A. In James 1:5, he commands people who lack wisdom to ask God for it. He noted that some people who petition God for wisdom may not really ask “in faith” (James 1:6).
- B. James offers two ways of prayer — one in faith and one doubting. And the doubting man is double minded and receives nothing (vv. 7-8).
 - 1. The doubting, double-minded man still has an outward religious expression; i.e., prayer for wisdom. Yet, that outward spectacle is condemned as tragically deficient.
 - 2. Jesus repeatedly demanded faith from those who approached Him (Matthew 9:29). When Jesus’s disciples couldn’t heal a child with demonically-induced seizures, they privately asked Him why and were provided a straightforward answer: unbelief (Matthew 17:20).
- C. Praying while not trusting the goodness, power, or inclination of God fits in the category of deficient faith, hypocrisy, and empty religion (cp. 1 John 5:14-15).
 - 1. There’s several important questions that we ask all the time (and they’re especially useful for teens):
 - a) Will I even have a future? Can I make a living and will society be stable?
 - b) How do I know what’s true? Who am I and what’s worth believing?
 - c) Will anyone actually show up for me? Am I known, valued, and loved?
 - d) Is God even there? Is God real and does He love me?
 - 2. God isn’t a genie in a bottle. But He is a Being who cares deeply for you and wants to help you in all the questions and troubles of life (Matthew 10:27-31; 1 Peter 5:5-7).
- D. In noting the necessity of faith in prayer, James doesn’t condemn the maturing cry of a striving faith (“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” Mark 9:24), nor does he insinuate that unanswered prayer is necessarily a sign of defective faith. But you have to decide to pray and trust His answers.

IV. Unrighteous Speech

- A. Sinful speech is another sign of insincere faith. To have a life characterized by sinful speech and still think oneself “spiritual” or “religious” is to be self-deceived (James 1:26).
- B. To “bridle the tongue” is an exhortation that encompasses the idea of guarding one’s speech from all manner of sinful words: gossip (2 Corinthians 12:20), slander (Leviticus 19:16), lying (Exodus 20:16), outbursts of wrath (Galatians 5:20), corrupt language (Ephesians 4:29), and vulgar joking (Ephesians 5:4). This is why are careful with our tongues (James 3:1-12), and ultimately slow to speak (James 1:19).
- C. Jesus said that speech is an overflow of the heart (Luke 6:45), and sinful patterns of speech indicate the nature of your faith (Matthew 7:15-20). Eternal judgment awaited any who attempted to turn the people against Jesus by slanderous accusations of blasphemy (Matthew 12:33-37). Eternal judgment still awaits if we turn people against Jesus by the way we talk.

V. Sinful Favoritism

- A. James also observes that a life exhibiting sinful favoritism is inconsistent with a healthy, living faith in Jesus ([James 2:1-9](#)).
- B. To treat someone preferentially within the church because they've got a high socioeconomic status, or they're socially or politically connected, or beautiful, famous, or young/old is to adopt the world's values and deny the faith one professes. The same is true if we look down on people because of their lack of socioeconomic status, race, or education. This runs counter to the character of God ([Acts 10:34](#); [Romans 2:11](#)) that we're supposed to imitate ([Ephesians 5:1](#); [1 Peter 1:16](#)).
- C. The construction of the statement in [James 2:1](#) proves there's one person worthy of special honor and preferential treatment — Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. If we rightly honor Jesus as glorious, how can we then mistreat His image bearers and fawn over some people for our selfish benefit?

Conclusion. Simply to affirm that “there is one God” ([James 2:19](#)) isn't sufficient to prove one has a living faith. Even the demons believe (intellectually) that there's one God and tremble in response. Ironically, this response is more visible and measurable than the reaction you expect from a person of dead faith.

What faith needs in order to be alive is hearing and doing God's will, a righteous and godly life, faith-filled prayers, speech that reflects holiness, and the desire to look at all people equally. May God bless you in the pursuit of righteousness.

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