

# A FAITH THAT MAKES

TOUGH DECISIONS EASIER



## *How to decide when you don't know what to decide?*

Last Saturday all of us here were required to make a decision; we had to make a choice. Or if I put it another way, all of us here had to make a judgement call. 'When was that', you ask? We were legally required to decide who we believed should be the next Lord Mayor for the City of Lake Macquarie.

Now, some people really enjoy this democratic process. They like having the freedom to vote for whomever they believe will be the best candidate for the job. But, as I listened to those both waiting in line to vote and discussions that took place leading up to election day, many didn't like the process that much. It wasn't however, that people didn't like voting.

Rather, those I overheard revealed they didn't feel they knew enough about each candidate to make an informed decision. They wanted to know more about each candidate's qualifications, their background and experience, how long they've been involved in the community, and where they stand on particular issues or policies, etc. Certainly, it's hard on Election Day to decide on the best candidate, when you're greeted by a sea of strange faces you've never seen before!

Decisions! We are faced with all the time. Did you know that scientists calculate the average person makes a whopping 35,000 choices every day. While that's an exhausting thought all-of-its-own, thankfully not all these thousands of decisions have equal consequences or ramifications. Decisions on what to have for breakfast can be made without much effort.

But we all know what it is like to make a tough decision, when the ramifications have life-altering consequences. These kinds of decisions we may devote considerable thought to. We weigh up the pros and cons. We may discuss our options with others whom we trust. Most of us will pray for wisdom, asking God, 'what is your will here?' 'Which way should I proceed?'

When placed in a position where we must make a tough decision, or a serious 'judgement call', most of us here would pause to gather as much information as we can, ensuring we have all the

necessary facts, so our decision can be based on the best intel we can obtain. We call this an informed decision.

Now, for a moment, it is going to seem like I'm changing track, but we'll end up back here a little later.

As we heard from Bill last week, James has been teaching that a strong faith doesn't show favouritism. In other words, a strong faith respects and honours all people, not judging or demeaning them, but rather them showing mercy and forgiveness just as our Heavenly Father has shown to us.

If you'd like to open your Bibles, or the Bibles in the pews, to the letter of James. We are on page 1722 and we'll pick up the letter in verse 14, *"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save them?"*

James begins to explore how to tell the difference between the person who has a genuine faith and those whose faith is quite useless and in fact, dead. He illustrates his point by showing that real genuine faith will show itself by being merciful and generous towards the poor. He finishes his illustration by saying, in verse 17, *"In the same way, faith by itself, if it not accompanied by action, is dead."* He's saying, 'If someone says that they have faith in God, yet neglects people who are poor or needy, this person's faith is dead.'

Strong words, right! What he's saying is 'their actions betray what they say they believe.'

Now the language that James uses, when he speaks about the necessity of good actions has caused a great deal of debate throughout the ages. Bill referred to this controversy last week. It is why Martin Luther didn't want James' letter included in the canon of Scripture. What was Martin Luther's problem?

Do you remember the verse we read at the beginning of the service? It was verse 24, *"You see a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone."*

The trouble is, James seems to be disagreeing with what Paul said when he wrote, *"it is by grace you are saved through faith ... not by your works so no one can boast"* (Ephesians 2:8-9).

To understand how we can reconcile this apparent contradiction, we need to step into some fairly hefty theological doctrines, while also keeping in mind the context of what James has been saying just before making this climatic statement.

If we go back to last week's passage, we'll see in verses 12-13, James told them to,

*"Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment."* (James 2:12-13)

Notice James says that one day we are going to be judged, and so we need to speak and act in light of this future judgement that we will face. Now, the topic of judgement doesn't often get discussed on Sundays. If it is mentioned, like it was last week, it was to remind us not to be judgemental of others, especially the poor. Jesus said almost word-for-word the same thing: "Do not judge others or you also will be judged" (Matthew 7:1-2). So when will we be judged?

In just a few moments we will affirm in the words of the Apostles Creed,

We believe that Jesus "... ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead."

So, when Jesus returns, every person whether living or having died, will face judgement.

However, there is not only one judgement mentioned in the Bible. There are two great judgements still to take place, both which revolve around how people have lived their lives (*Note: I haven't included the judgement of the devil and his angels here*).

The first, and most important judgement is called the "Judgement Seat of Christ". Those, who during their life on earth, place their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, have their names written in Jesus' book of eternal life (Revelation 21:27) will face this judgement.

The second is called the Great White Throne of Judgement. This is the judgement that those who during their lifetime rejected Jesus must face (Revelation 20:11-15). We won't explore this judgement now.

However, many Christians, having received Christ's free gift of salvation say, "If I have already received entry into heaven, what difference does my life here on earth make? Does it really matter whether I do good things or not?" And this is the question James is responding to. He is reminding these believers that there is a judgement every Christian will face. Paul spoke of this in his letter to the Corinthians,

*"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." (2 Corinthians 5:10, and Romans 14:10b-12)*

In this judgment, Christians will not be judged for their faith in Christ as Saviour, but for their faithfulness in following Christ as Lord. They will have to give an account for how they used the gifts and talents and abilities God gave them. "In that day," James says, "your faith in Christ alone will not profit you." Why? Because at this judgement, when you look around, everyone on your left and right also has been granted eternal life.

So, this leaves us asking, "What role do my good actions play?" and James answers, "When you stand before the judgment seat of Christ, it is your good deeds that will be very profitable and bring you great reward."

Now, we spoke at the beginning of my message about how frequently we need to make tough decisions. We were reminded that when a difficult or serious decision needs to be made, it is best to be informed. Well the prophetic writers of the Bible have thoroughly informed us of what is in our future. So that allows us to make an informed decision about our lives. That helps us develop a faith that makes tough decisions easier.

For, is there any decision more serious than where we will spend eternity? And salvation does require a decision; a decision to accept Jesus offer of forgiveness. We each must decide whether or not we will bow in submission to Jesus as our personal Lord and Saviour.

And this decision is, no doubt, the most important one each person must make, for it has eternal ramifications. If you're still not sure of that decision, please do not delay seeing me after the service.

However, many of us have already made that important decision. If that's the case, then the next crucial decisions are how we will spend each day. Will we devote each day to using the gifts and talents God entrusted to us?

Will we devote ourselves to showing to others the same grace, mercy and forgiveness God extended to us?

As we are making one of our 35,000 decisions each day, let us ensure the vast majority are ones which position us to receive the great reward promised to those who desire to bring praise and honour to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

#### PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. While James uses the word "justified" in the sense of shown to be genuine or in the right, Paul uses "justify" or "justification" in reference to our right standing before God through Christ. (Rom. 3:21-26; Gal. 2:16-17; Eph. 2:8-9). How do we know that God saves us by His grace alone through faith in Christ alone (rather than through our works)?
2. Though we continue to struggle with sin and remain imperfect, what are ways you've seen God at work in your life and producing good fruit in you since becoming a follower of Jesus?
3. How does this passage fit with James' overall emphasis of seeking to help believers practically and wisely live out their faith in everyday life?
4. Read Gen. 15:1-6. Why did God declare Abraham righteous before Him (15:6)? Now read Gen. 22:1-14. How did Abraham demonstrate that His faith in God was real?
5. How would you summarize James 2:14-26 in one sentence?

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Read Eph. 2:10; Matt. 12:33-37; Rom. 6:1-4; 8:9-13. Though we are saved by faith alone, why should our faith lead to works or be demonstrated or shown to be true through good works (as James says)?
2. How would you explain the difference between saying that good works will grow out of genuine faith in Christ versus saying good works must be added to faith in Christ?
3. What is the difference between the kind of belief demons or unbelievers might have (1:19) and the kind of belief that leads to salvation and transformation through Jesus?
4. Read James 1:22-25 and 2:15-16. Why should these passages warn us against complacency with hearing truth but not responding in faith and action?
5. What are intentional things we can do to not have a "dead faith" or to see the Word we hear lead to real fruit in our lives?