

“(NOT) Judging by Faith” based on James 2:1-7 with Mark 7:24-37

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on September 12, 2021, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

About three and a half years ago, Claire and I had a difficult choice to make. We had visited three churches for our first call, and all three made offers. It was a good problem to have, but certainly one we could not take lightly. We asked ourselves – Which place is the one where God wants us to be? We wondered – How can we know if we’re making the right choice? We prayed – God, please help us to know what to do.

In the end, one church felt perfect for us if we had been 10 years younger and had no kids. It was a place where we might thrive, if we were free to work unlimited hours. The second felt like it would be perfect for us if our kids were 10 years older. We believed we could thrive there, if our kids were more self-sufficient. Lastly, the one we chose, felt right for us, right then and there. So, after much prayer we chose this one, and declined two. While, looking back, I know this was the right choice, often while there, we seriously wondered – Did we make the right choice?

It can be hard to discern God’s will in our lives, and hard to be sure of our choices. We all want to pray and have clear cut answers, some confirmation of our choices. We want there to be a thumbs up, in some way, shape or form from Jesus, as if to say, ‘Good job, you made the right choice, now you will prosper.’ We want proof that our faith is not in vain, that we are chosen. Yes, we want proof that God is on our side, that God hears us. And we struggle when things don’t go as we hoped, when it seems, everything that can go wrong, has gone wrong, that God seems inactive, perhaps even judgmental, admonishing us with trials.

What we need to discern whether we are living into God’s call for us is wisdom. In the Hebrew Scriptures, four books are wholly considered to be wisdom literature. And it becomes five books when you add a large portion of the Psalms. By wisdom literature, I mean writings about God and personal virtue, that are not dependent on the story being told or any history, but the wisdom conveyed in dialogue, sayings and parables. By that definition, in the New Testament writings, it is really just the book of James that is for us. It is a book of wisdom about God and virtue, only about discerning God’s will.

James is unique in the New Testament in that it has no narrative of the good news of Jesus, no real account of the life, death, or resurrection, who Jesus is, or what he did. It presents comfort to the faithful, who are suffering and undergoing great trial. James offers wisdom for those who already know of Jesus’s victory and puts Jesus in continuity with the Hebrew scriptures. He addresses those who may be tempted to wonder, based on their own suffering, their experience, whether Jesus really did defeat sin and death, and whether the God of Israel is in support of Jesus’s followers.

This book, which I believe to have been written by Jesus’s brother before 62 AD when he was killed, and therefore, I believe it was written in the build up to the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66 AD. I believe it addresses Christians and Jews who feel persecuted for their faith, who wonder why God would allow them to suffer anymore under Rome and might be tempted to seek political influence and worldly power. The second audience is those who were going the other way, joining the Zealots to prepare a revolt. The third audience is those who are ready to give up and fall away from the faith altogether.

James offers for us practical and pastoral wisdom. James provides for us a center to hold, when trying to discern God's will. You see, for James, who opens his letter telling us to count trials as a reason for joy. Yes, trials are a reason for joy. There is no connection between faithfulness to God and success by worldly standards. For James it is better to be poor and lowly to be raised up by God, than it is to be wealthy and powerful, only to be brought down by God. Temptation or trials are a blessing, because it is an opportunity to resist, which, he says, brings life, whereas sin brings us death.

Leading up to what we read today, James says we are to be quick to listen, slow to anger, and that human anger does not produce, or is not the work, of God's righteousness. Indeed, he calls on the reader to not be passive hearers of God's word, but doers. He says that we cannot see ourselves in a mirror and then forget what we have seen. Instead, we must see ourselves as we are – sinful and humble – and seek the law of liberty, which we heard today – love your neighbor as yourself. Then, and here's the tough one, he warns that if you are unable to control what you say, then you cannot consider yourself pious or religious, for true piety, is caring for the poor.

That is the lead up to today's portion of the reading, and I hope that it speaks to us. You see, in our culture, we tend to count trials not as joy, but as a curse. There are large strains of Christians who believe you can access wealth or health by your faith. While most of us easily may say we reject the prosperity gospel, the truth is even I am tempted by our culture that tells us that good things in life are proof that what I am doing is in accord with God's will. Likewise, we are tempted to think that suffering, things like poverty and illness, are like curses, the result of bad choices, or worse – sin or the consequences of their sin.

We as Christians in an increasingly secular culture, are not unlike James's audience with all three audiences present and in need of his wisdom. There are some who are tempted to seek worldly wealth, power and influence. There are some who are tempted to rise up in anger against unbelievers who are ruining the world! There are some who are tempted to fall away from the faith altogether. But all, even those holding on, need to be reminded of the truth, that we are to gather as equals, without partiality, to serve.

To those of us tempted to see the church flourish by wealth, power and influence, James says it's easy to see a couple of newcomers enter and for us to judge their value. We see fancy clothes and think, she might be able to help our finances. But as James said, God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith. Friends, in trials, isn't faith what we need most? You see, James points out that we judge the rich as worthy and the poor as unworthy, when we favor the rich for what they have. But the truth is that any of us with resources, we are not to be praised for having those resources, but we must be engaged in using those resources for God's will in service to the church and those who are without, who are in need. We can neither give someone a free pass for having wealth, nor condemn someone because they are poor.

To the second audience, those of us who have lived a righteous life so far by keeping the 10 commandments, and so, we might be entitled bend the law, to sin on God's behalf, even kill or mock someone who does not believe as we do. James reminds us that we guilty of all that we think we are innocent of, when we violate the law, choosing not to love our neighbor as ourself. You see, the royal law, the law of liberty is to love our neighbor. If we act and speak by this law, we will not

judge others, but instead mercy will triumph over judgement. There is no need to avenge for God. God can handle God's self pretty well. Our calling instead is to love as God loves us.

And to those of us who are tempted to fall away from the faith because it is hard to be a Christian, especially in a secular world where many around us think belief in God makes us seem dumb or uneducated. Well James reminds us that to have faith is to participate in the work of God. You see, if we feel like we are falling away, then it is because our faith is not a living faith. It is not enough to say we are Christian and offer thoughts and prayers. If we see someone without food or clothing, anyone in need, our calling is to act, to be alive in our faith, not be complacent. If we act on our faith, then our faith grows stronger and is alive in us for the journey ahead.

My sisters and brothers, James offers us great wisdom here in understanding God. You see, the rich are not rich because God has rewarded them for righteousness, neither should we see the poor as poor because they are unrighteous. We make evil judgements when we say these types of things. And so that goes for how we look at ourselves, too.

You may be going through a lot right now. Maybe you have loved ones who are sick. Maybe you are struggling financially. Maybe you are burdened by the hate in this world and don't know what to do. I want you to know that your suffering or trials is not a punishment from God, but an opportunity to seek God in the midst of what you are going through.

Remember the gospel truth that God is present with us, in our suffering. Indeed, the One True God we know as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, shared in your humanity in the Son by being born a human, living as you live in human flesh, and dying on that Roman cross, only to rise again on the third day, conquering sin and death forever, preparing you and all of us by forgiveness of sins to be temples of the Holy Spirit.

Siblings, the Holy Spirit is at work in you and among us all to transform our lives, to make us doers of God's word, to have a faith that is alive in how we love others. Indeed, by this, we know that the God who shares in our life desires also for us to share in fulness of God's life, now and forever. This is the grace of Jesus Christ which you and I have received. So let us share that grace, indeed, hold our faith without favoritism, the faith of Jesus who is the anointed king of glory.

Notice the healings in Mark's gospel today – both were outsiders to the God of Israel. While I'm always baffled by Jesus's apparent rudeness, calling the Syro-Phoenician woman a puppy or little dog. The reality is that is likely what every one of his disciples was thinking. But that is not what matters most in this story. What matters most is this woman's perseverance to make her case before Jesus, not based on her worthiness, but the overflow of his generosity.

She does not ask for the food of the children of Israel, but for the crumbs that fall from that food. This is humility. This is faith. This is boldness and honesty. It's desperation and love. You see she is acting out of love for her suffering daughter, without fear. Though she is a gentile in a gentile land, with greater standing than Jesus as a Judean, she also knows she is an outsider to the one who can heal her, and that she is talking to someone far greater than she. And see too the deaf and mute man, who is taken to Jesus, another gentile, a man from the region of Sidon, who may not have been worthy, but still God gave the gift of faith and he was called to witness to Jesus.

My sisters and brothers, after we accepted that first call in New Jersey, we discovered an infestation of crickets and the mice that go with them. They have a little life cycle where the mice eat the crickets, and the crickets eat the waste of the mice. Then we had to take Josephine to the emergency room with a respiratory virus. She could barely breathe. Then the funerals started – I did around 30 of them in three years there. Then there was the clique that didn't like me very much, let's hope one doesn't start here. And then there was the onset of COVID-19, in a church completely unprepared to go online.

What I know from James is that trials are to be counted as joy, for we persist through them by faith. What I know from James is that trials are not a reason to assume God's wrath or that we are not doing what God called us to do. Nor are riches, health and good fortune a reason to assume God's endorsement. Regardless of struggles or fortune, I believe we were called to that church and so we walked along some wonderful people doing God's work. The trials and blessings were merely opportunities to persevere or use what God gave us to do more.

Likewise, you see, I also believe that God has called us here to Shelby, and let me tell you, I appreciate so many of you consoling us, apologizing for us catching COVID, promising better days. I do believe better days are ahead with blessings, but I there will also be things that will make us question, instinctively, if we made the right choice. However, neither is proof of good choices or bad choices. They are not proof of us making God happy, unless it is how we love our neighbors, living by the law of liberty in response.

Indeed, none of us have the wisdom to judge any trial as a judgement from God, no matter if it is COVID or AIDS or poverty or disability or any calamity that we face in our lives. The faithful are often not healed, and the faithful are often unable to escape poverty. So likewise, none of us have the wisdom to see wealth or health, as some sign of righteousness, as if our faith is a work to earn favor. As James noted, the rich can be sinful oppressors too.

There is no faith that protects you like some kind of magic. While, faith does promise eternal life that God provides by grace, it is not a talisman we use to get what we want. However, we do have the wisdom of James and the gift of a faith which justifies us, not by acting alone, but by compelling us to live by that law of liberty. This is not the freedom to do as we please, but liberty to love our neighbors, and the freedom to do so without partiality or evil judgement, for this is the surest way, for us to do the will of God. Amen.