

James 2: 1-13

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Date: 02 February 2020

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[0:00] Matthew 18, I'm reading from verse 21. Matthew 18 and verse 21. I can read down to verse 35, down to the end of the chapter.

Matthew 18 and verse 21. Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times.

Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but 77 times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

As he began the settlement, a man who owed him 10,000 talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children, and all that he had, be sold to repay the debt.

The servant fell on his knees before him. Be patient with me, he begged, and I will pay back everything. The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt, and let him go.

[1:04] But then that servant went out. He found one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. Pay back what you owe me, he demanded.

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, be patient with me, and I will pay you back. But he refused. Instead, he went off and he had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in.

You wicked servant, he said. I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?

In anger, his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.

[2:07] Again, reading from the book of James and from James chapter 2. James chapter 2. I'm reading verses 1 down to verse 13. James 2 and verses 1 to 13.

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, here's a good seat for you, but say to the poor man, you stand there, or sit on the floor by my feet, have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my dear brother, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom? He promised those who love him that you have insulted the poor.

Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

[3:26] If you really keep the royal law found in scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, do not commit adultery, also said, do not murder.

If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. 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. And I may give praise to God for his word.

Let's again sing this time a sing together. Of a people of God united together in worship and fellowship with joy. We turn to James chapter 2 verses 1 to 13 where we explore this basic truth that favoritism is forbidden.

[4:40] Now I'm sure all of us, we recognize that favoritism is definitely not just an ancient problem. It's not something James wrote about and we have no concept of what that looks like.

Let's begin with a mental exercise. Think of a time and a situation in which you were overlooked. Or if you're struggling with that, think about a time when you saw someone else be overlooked.

Perhaps your face didn't fit because of how you look, because of your status, your job or your culture. As we think about that time, think to how did you feel in that situation?

I imagine, feel pretty small, devalued, feel a loss of dignity and worth.

We recognize, I think, by instinct that there is something wrong and ugly about favoritism. And maybe we think, well surely that's not going to be a problem in a church.

[5:48] Well it clearly was in James' day. I was thinking back to a story of a friend of ours in Glasgow who found himself being chased out of a bookshop as a supposed shoplifter because he was dressed a little bit scruffy.

It was a Christian bookshop. He went in to get some good theology, got chased out for having the wrong face. And there's something funny about that. But then there's also something profoundly sad about that, isn't there?

I don't think you look very Christian, therefore get out of my shop. I've been in a church that really struggled to know what to do when a homeless man came. Maybe you've been there to see the awkwardness.

What do we do? How do we show a welcome or otherwise? And it's one of the things I'm really thankful for in the clue that we have that reputation for being welcoming, for being open, for being the kind of place where people do feel valued and want to come and stick around.

It's so important. It's biblical. But when James writes about it here and we find it in the New Testament, we understand favoritism must be for the church a constant danger.

[6:56] So what we're going to see in this section is James tackling it head on with an example from his own day. And then he's going to give us strong gospel reasons for saying favoritism is forbidden.

Again, this is ethical teaching that I guess most people in our society would say favoritism discrimination is bad. But James is going to give us gospel reasons for us as Christians to say favoritism has no place.

So let's look. First four verses, we see both the principle and the problem. As always with James' teaching, the principle is crystal clear.

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. In God's church, as God's people, we do not play favorites.

And James does more than that. He sharpens the focus more and he says, because we are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, there is to be no favoritism. And notice he talks about Jesus as glorious, the Lord of glory.

[8:04] Where is the glory of Jesus most clearly revealed? On earth. It's seen in his weakness. It's seen in his death. On the cross.

When he is lifted up in glory. Glory. So because of that, we shouldn't dismiss those who are poor and weak. But then we also think of the Lord Jesus in glory.

And since Jesus is now seated in absolute glory in heaven, we should not overvalue the rich and the powerful of the world. And think that we need to gain approval from them because we want to live to honor Jesus.

So the principle, as those who want to follow Jesus, we shouldn't show favoritism. And then he moves from principle to example, showing how the gospel confronted in their day a cultural norm. It was a very divided society. So it would not be atypical for the rich to disregard the poor. And so James is saying, in the church, we are to have a different kind of culture.

[9:16] So the example is there in verses 2 and 3. Again, it's not difficult for us to see. One group is given the red carpet treatment when they come into church because they are rich and powerful.

They seem to be people of influence. Whereas another group of people are told to go stand in the corner and be quiet because they are the poor and the weak.

And James in verse 4 gets the problem. When we do that, it says, Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

A discrimination where one type of person is valued more than another. A discrimination where the world's values are applied to how we look at someone rather than God's values.

And James says when that happens, we become judges with evil thoughts. If we think in terms of first class and second class, worthy of my attention and not, James says we're being evil and it has no place in God's family.

[10:23] Secondly, we're studying the story of Joseph in the Old Testament and we see it in Joseph's sort of messed up family where he's treated as the favourite. It's bad news. It does not go well.

It is wrong. So the example that James gives, the problem in the church in his day was of rich and poor. And so maybe we can be tempted to say, Well, I don't have a problem with rich or poor. I value people equally based on their finances. But before we let ourselves off the hook too quickly, we maybe need to ask ourselves the question, Where am I tempted to roll the red carpet out for one type of person and tell another type, Go stand in the corner.

We respond differently to people based on their personality. Some of us, we perhaps like to make a fuss of people who are loud and funny and generous in the centre of the party.

Maybe others of us perhaps would avoid that kind of person and we like to spend time with those who are quiet. Can we show welcome to both? Perhaps a person's culture will determine how well they are treated.

[11:30] Do we know them and do we know their people? Or some of us like to avoid anything to do with our own culture and we value those who have different cultures from us. Can we treat people of different cultures the same?

Perhaps we choose to base our opinions of people on the gifts or resources we imagine they might bring.

Perhaps in a church setting. It's not uncommon to pay attention at certain times of the year to when people come into church and to think, There's a family.

We like families in church. Let's make a fuss of the family. Or perhaps we think, well there's somebody who could serve in a particular capacity, so let's really roll the red carpet out for them because they can meet our needs.

Other people, we're not concerned about them, so we'll just ignore them. Perhaps for us it's whether somebody is seen to be useful or whether someone is seen to be a burden. There's lots of different ways in which we can be tempted towards favoritism.

[12:35] And again, one of the things that we need to do is to know ourselves so that we can allow the gospel to challenge us so that the gospel might change us. So there's the principle and there's the problem.

Now for the rest of our time, we're going to look at why favoritism is forbidden in the church of God. First of all, verses 5 to 7, because of God's choice.

Now look at the logic of verses 5 to 7 with me. Listen, my dear brothers, still talking to the people of God. So James is making that point that we see through history, we see in the ministry of Jesus. God chooses many who are poor to be part of his kingdom. Therefore, the challenge is, why are you, church, rejecting them?

James says, God delights to honor the poor, giving them a place in the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, why, church, are you insulting them?

[13:53] And then in verse 6 and 7, there's the issue of the, is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?

And what James is saying is that God's name is being slandered by the rich who are mistreating others who are seen as less valuable.

Church, why do you positively favor them when they're bringing God's name into disrepute by failing to love others well?

And so for this church that James is writing to, the heart of the problem seems to be that they've bought into the world's way of looking at people. They've bought into the world's assessment system and they've forgotten God's way of working.

So they've ended up with actions and attitudes that are actually going against the grain of how God often, most often, chooses to work. Rich, rich, being favored over the poor.

[14:59] Whereas God chooses the poor, positively chooses the poor. When you look at the global church, think about where the church is growing fastest.

It's growing in places that are overwhelmingly poor. God chooses to show mercy to the poor. When we look at Jesus' ministry, why did so many of the religious leaders despise Jesus and fail to understand him?

Because he was showing mercy to the poor and to the outsiders. And James says, look at God's choice. In fact, we can look at chapter 1 and verse 27, where we read there, the religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after those who are poor and who need mercy.

So the emphasis from God, from God's character, is to show care for the poor, to be glad to extend mercy to those who need it most.

But this church is doing the opposite. So they've lost sight of God's choice and God's values.

Remember, this is written to believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

[16:14] Think about his ministry. Jesus, when he came into Nazareth, beginning his ministry, announced that he had come to bring good news to the poor.

Quoting from Isaiah. Those who are materially poor and, of course, spiritually poor. When Paul writes about the gospel, he can talk about Jesus who was rich becoming poor.

So that those who are poor, both materially and spiritually, in Christ become spiritually and eternally rich. So the whole thread of the gospel is towards favoring and showing mercy to the poor.

Because God's choosing of the poor illustrates how the gospel works. It's not to those who can earn their way into the kingdom, because nobody can earn their way into the kingdom.

So the gospel humbles us in the first place. We have to say, along with the hymn writer, nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.

[17:16] So we must, in the first instance, be aware of our spiritual poverty. We must recognize that we cannot contribute through our resources or through our merit towards our own salvation.

Rather, we sing and we say, Jesus paid it all. So all to him I owe. So the gospel relies on the mercy and grace of God, not on our merit and not on our wealth.

And so the gospel says no to favoritism. The next reason that favoritism is wrong is because of God's law.

Look at verses 8 to 11. If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right.

Now, for those of us who are from the UK and who were born after 1973, this is our first taste of life outside of the European Union.

[18:36] Wonderfully exciting, or not? But one of the things that is inevitable in this new situation is that we can expect lots of new regulations, laws, and policies that will come alongside this new political reality.

Now that the UK is sort of totally sovereign, there will be a whole bunch of laws that will have to be instituted in order to govern us.

Now for us as Christians, we are those who have gained a new citizenship. We are citizens of God's kingdom of heaven.

And we now have a royal law, to use James' language, to govern us. What is that royal law? Well, let's listen to the king.

How did the king sum up the royal law? Jesus said there are two basic commandments. We can summarize the commandments under these two heads. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

[19:46] Now compared to the complexity of all the legislation of nation states, the Bible's ethics, the Bible's laws are actually really simple to understand.

They're deeply challenging to live out, but simple to understand. And here James focuses on that second one, love your neighbor as yourself.

That's the bottom line. And then he goes on to show in verses 9 to 11, another point about the law, and it's this.

It's that we cannot be selective when it comes to the royal law. We cannot decide, well, I like that part, but I'm not so bothered about that part. I feel okay and in line with that, my natural thinking, what is this, seems to impinge on my freedom, so I'm going to ignore that one.

If we break it at one point, James says the whole law is broken. So he talks about if you don't commit adultery, but you do commit murder, you've become a lawbreaker.

[20:50] You know, you wouldn't have a criminal, what it was in court, and they were accused of murder. And as they stood in the dock, the evidence was clear. There was DNA, fingerprint evidence at the scene.

There was eyewitnesses that they had committed the crime. And if the only defense that the convict had was, well, I've never cheated on my wife, both jury and judge are still going to find that person to be guilty.

To break the law at one point is to break the whole. Now, how does that connect to what James is saying about favoritism? Look at verse nine. If you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

So to be guilty of favoritism is to be guilty of breaking the royal law. And we might think, I don't remember a law saying we shouldn't be committing favoritism.

Where do we see that? Well, remember our mental exercise at the beginning. When we were overlooked, when we were snubbed, did we feel loved and valued in that moment?

[22:10] And of course we didn't. Therefore, favoritism is denying someone else the love that they are owed. Therefore, favoritism is a breaking of the royal law.

Therefore, it is forbidden. And to extend that further, it wouldn't be enough to say, well, I'm loving and kind and welcoming to some people. You know, there's some types of people I find it hard to get on with, so I ignore them.

The royal law means all is our standard. Kindness, welcome, love, mercy to all. Selective obedience, James is saying, is actually disobedient.

Again, this is one of those moments where James' teaching is deeply convicting as we allow God's word to work into our hearts and into our conscience.

James is talking, remember, to believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. How do we see Jesus in relation to this royal law?

[23:19] How does Jesus succeed in keeping this royal law where we fail? I was reading this week about Jesus calling the twelve, and it never ceases to amaze me that for those three years of Jesus' public ministry, while he's spending every day with the twelve disciples just about, there is never a hint that he treats Judas Iscariot any different to the others.

Even to the point where Judas goes out to betray Jesus, there's no sense that he's treated any different. When we think about Jesus' public ministry, he touches the untouchables.

He welcomes the rejected. He honors the despised. Jesus, as he is on the cross, he says, Father, forgive them.

They do not know what they are doing. He is loving his enemies as they brutally killed him. Jesus is the only one who has perfectly kept the royal law.

What's the message of the cross? God demonstrates his love for us in this. While we were still sinners, while we were God's enemies, while we were rebelling against God, while we were idolaters creating other things to worship, in that state, Christ died for us.

[24:56] That's the royal law. Jesus leaving the glory of heaven to come and rescue us, to die in our place for our sin. Jesus kept the law of love.

He shows us glorious, undeserved love at the cross. And because of that, favoritism has no place in the family of God.

The last reason why favoritism is forbidden, we find in verses 12 and 13. And it's because of God's mercy.

Verse 12, 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. So back in chapter 1, verse 25, James talked about the law that gives freedom, the perfect law that gives freedom.

[26:03] And he said, when a person keeps that law, they will be blessed. So he's set up for us this reality that keeping God's law is for our best.

It's always for our good. When we live within the proper limits that God sets for human life, it leads to human flourishing. So he has said that about the law, but here he has something different to say about the law.

And in verse 12, he is reminding us that believers in Jesus will be judged by this perfect law. We will be judged against the perfect law.

What does he mean? What does the Bible mean when it talks about believers being judged? So Jesus has come once, and he has won that decisive victory over sin and the devil and death there through the cross and the resurrection.

Now he's returned to glory, and he now rules and reigns over all, but one day he will come back.

The second coming, Jesus will come back both as king and as judge.

[27:11] And at that point, we're told every knee will bow, every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and everyone will stand before Jesus the judge to receive the just sentence.

Now for believers who have already received grace and mercy, Jesus the judge having been judged in our place at the cross, we will not be condemned, we will not be sent to hell on that day, we are secure in Christ, but we will be judged.

Do our lives match up to the royal law? Do our lives match up to this perfect law that gives freedom? Have we in our lives been conformed more and more under this law that brings freedom, which is to look more and more like the Lord Jesus?

Donald read for us from Matthew chapter 18. The teaching of James is the teaching of Jesus. The parable of the unmerciful servant.

The king who calls in debtors and the one man with a huge debt and he begs for mercy and he receives mercy and his debt is cancelled, but that man knowing freedom from his debt refuses to pay that mercy forward instead is harsh and throws someone else into prison.

[28:43] He finds himself under the judgment of his king. Jesus is saying that mercy needs to transform our heart and it needs to be paid forward.

Obedience is a mark of Christian faith. One basis, the Bible says, for our assurance that we are God's people is that we obey God's law.

That we would show mercy and kindness. That we wouldn't show favoritism. That we would welcome everyone, see them as valuable as people made in the image of God.

Again, he is speaking to believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

And he is reminding us of the mercy that we have received. A mercy that triumphs over judgment. Why is mercy so important in God's church?

[29:47] It's so important because mercy is so critical to the gospel. When we think about the storyline of the Bible, we discover a God who before the world was ever made, knew that his creation, his image bearers would fall into sin.

And God knew the misery that that fall into sin would bring. And in mercy, before the world was ever made, he prepared the solution.

To the human problem, the problem of sin. In the sending of his own son, Jesus, to become one of us. To pay the ransom price. Before the world was ever made, before anybody could ever even think about earning it, it's all of mercy.

All of grace. So because our faith is built on mercy, favoritism and a lack of mercy has no place.

So James had a lot to say to us about why favoritism should have no place in a church. And positively, we see him beginning to establish a wonderful vision for what God's church would look like.

[31:11] Imagine a church where the people of God were hearers and doers of the word in this, in that we refuse to show favoritism. Where anyone who came in the doors would be welcomed and valued.

Regardless of whether they were Christian or not, regardless of which part of the world they were from, regardless of rich or poor or old or young. Imagine a church where nobody was assessed from the world's standards.

But rather we put on the gospel glasses. And we would see people as made in the image of God. We would see believers as our brothers and sisters in Christ to be welcomed and loved.

Imagine a church where no one would need to show off, as it were, their CV or their talent or their status or their background in order to find a place where they could belong.

Imagine a Christian community without double standards or selective welcome. Imagine how different to the communities that we live in, to the workplaces that we find ourselves in, if there was no division into tribes.

[32:26] Or we wouldn't pull up the drawbridges. Where we'd insulate ourselves from others. It would be a wonderful counter-cultural community and a testimony to God's grace in our lives.

A church without favoritism. A church spending itself to show mercy and to fulfill the royal law. It's how Jesus lived.

It's how the gospel comes to us. And it's part of our mission as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ to show there is another way.

There is a better way. Because there is a God of mercy. A God who, by grace, welcomes any who will come to him in faith.

Blessed are there. Let's avoid a usually whereitaria. And everything is as00s. And everything works. And I'll serve as a survivor. And unfortunately for a cis speaking... So the churchesarri... and that is one day with the clergy ■■■■ for her own reason.

[33:32] But as an example, it's only one day with scripture for a true meaning around the world. So that we don't want to recognize ... how our cholesterol is unserem heart and bone exactly DAMMASH and what's happening inHam■■■.