

James Ch2v1-13

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 August 2023

Preacher: John Fallows

[0 : 00] Yeah, so this is the week that you can definitely judge me more than any other week, so you can decide how happy or sad you'll be when I'm leaving next week, based on how this week goes. If you would like to open up your Bibles, and I encourage you always, whenever we're looking at the Bible together, to open up your Bibles, whether that be the Church Bibles or otherwise, to James chapter 2.

It is on page 1213 of the Church Bibles. So that's James chapter 2, page 1213 of the Church Bibles here. So it reads, My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine robes, and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old 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 brothers and sisters, 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 to those who love him?

But you have dishonored the poor. It's 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 blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

[1 : 43] 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, You shall not commit adultery, also said, You shall 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. As we come to God's word this morning, let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word.

We thank you for the fact that it speaks into so many different aspects of our lives. We pray now that you will help us all to hear your word, to receive it in our hearts, and to let it change and transform us.

[2 : 54] We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen. So, favoritism. I wonder what pictures the word favoritism conjures up for you.

It's not the most popular thing in the world, is it? So, at home, it might be a son or daughter being treated better than another son or daughter. And that might be something really trivial, like it might be an extra scoop of ice cream, or maybe the bigger half of a cookie that's been split in half.

Or maybe it may be something more serious than that. It may be attention. It may be love. It may be care. At school, it might be the bad behavior of a teacher's favorite being overlooked.

Or in work, a favorite member of staff being given more time, more resources, more sympathy than others. Or in government, or so many other areas of lives. Jobs for the boys, lucrative contracts for friends.

So, I think it's fair to say that favoritism or partiality is not the most popular thing in the world. But it's also, obviously, not a recent invention. We see it here in a letter from nearly 2,000 years ago.

[3 : 56] So, how does God respond to favoritism in his word? Well, verse 1, no surprises. My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, must not show favoritism.

It's also what we want him to write, isn't it? It's plain and simple. If you are a follower of Christ, you must not show favoritism. And it is really tempting for me to say, Grant, Alex, if you want to come back up now, I'm ready to wrap up.

Because if you're a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, then don't show favoritism is the core message of this passage. It doesn't get any more complex than that in some way.

Do not show favoritism. However, if we leave it at that, then we miss out on answers to so many other questions, which are also answered in this passage. For example, why would James write this?

How could favoritism become a problem in the church in the first place? Why is favoritism wrong or how is it bad? How big an issue is all of this, really? What does our showing favoritism show about our hearts?

[5 : 04] And if we're not to show favoritism, then what should we show instead? But before we think a bit about those questions, there's one other question that's not specifically answered in this passage, which is, what is the context here?

So if we go back to the first verse in the letter, you'll find that James is writing this with specific groups of people in mind. He's writing to people specifically from Jewish backgrounds who have become Christians, who are following Jesus.

I'm not going to summarize the whole book here, but one key theme throughout the book is that we shouldn't be double-minded as we follow Christ. And bringing out that theme, James frequently puts two things alongside each other, and he says these two don't match up.

They don't belong together. So, for example, in James 1, verses 5 to 8, you can read about a person who asks God for wisdom, but who doesn't believe that he'll actually ultimately provide it.

If you go just to James 1, verse 26, just before this passage, we see a person who considers himself or herself religious, but doesn't keep a tight rein on their tongue. James 2, verses 15 to 18, just after this passage, you have a person who claims to have faith in Christ, but who does nothing to help other people.

[6 : 16] And in James chapter 3, we have a barrage of them in verses 9 to 12. We have praising God and cursing human beings. We have fresh water and salt water flowing together. We have fig trees bearing olives.

We have grapevines bearing figs. One of the key comparisons James makes is in James chapter 1, verses 22 to 24. And it says, Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves.

Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word, but does not do what it says, is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror, and after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

Why would someone look in a mirror? Well, if you're as vain as me, it's because you're looking to see if there's anything wrong. Is my hair out of place?

100%. It always is. Am I caked in dirt or sweat, though? Do I look okay? Am I passable? But the looking isn't really the most important part there, is it?

[7 : 19] Because it would be really strange, sheer madness, if I looked in the mirror, saw that I was absolutely caked and covered in dirt, and then sort of shrugged my shoulders, walked away, and didn't do anything about it.

I've identified the problem, but I haven't actually fixed it in any way. And it's kind of the same as we're looking at God's word. What we're doing here this morning is looking at and listening to the word. But we need to look at ourselves in the mirror at the same time, so to speak.

And then, once we've looked at ourselves in the mirror and identified where the gaps are between us and God's word, we need to actually do something to fill those gaps, to clean off the dirt, as it were.

So if we're looking at our passage this morning, James chapter 2, verses 1 to 13, verse 1 is the core. Don't show favoritism. And we're going to look at the passage to see some of the answers to the other questions we looked at earlier.

But let's keep in mind, as we do, the imperative, the command of this passage is that we do not show favoritism. And so if we walk out of here having a great academic knowledge of what favoritism is, how to define it, what it looks like, what the steps should be in order to get rid of it in our lives or anything like that, and we don't actually put any of that into practice, then we've completely missed the point of the passage.

[8 : 37] To take James' words, we'd be just deceiving ourselves. So with all that context in mind, let's look at verse 1. My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

And James goes on, verses 2 to 4, to give a specific example, doesn't he? He mentions a man who comes into, well, two men who come into a meeting of the church. One is very rich, one is fine clothes, a gold ring, another is poor, he's dressed in dirty rags.

And he says that these men are treated differently in this hypothetical example. One is told, oh, here's a fine seat for you. But the other one is told, oh, go over there.

I'm still at the floor by my feet. And he says in verse 4 that this is a sign of evil thoughts and judgment. So you can possibly imagine that kind of scene.

It's very visual. But let's take a step back for a second and ask us, well, why would that arise? Why could that arise in a church setting? Also, incidentally, is this just for the people who welcome people as they come in the door and say, yeah, the seats are down here?

[9 : 44] Or is this for everyone? Spoiler alert, it's for everyone. Maybe, maybe the reason why they treated these people differently is because they hoped to gain something from the rich man.

They might easily think, well, here's a man who could help us. Here's a man who could be useful to us. See, favoritism gets very unpopular unless we stand to gain from it ourselves.

I have a friend who keeps an out-of-context quote book. And for people who don't know what that concept is or what it means, it means he takes down things that his friends say jokingly or sarcastically. Or ironically, completely out of context.

And then he'll bring them up in six months' time. And without the context around them, the quotes sound outrageous. There's one example I have on him. I was chatting with him about someone in his church.

And he responded, well, you know, there's only so much I can do. I'm already being nice to her, so she helps out. Now, I do need to stress that he was joking when he said that.

[10 : 51] But at the same time, is that very different from how we act ourselves? Not necessarily just in church, though, altogether, if there are people here who are involved in choosing church rotas and all that sort of stuff, are we liable to that ourselves?

But are there people who we generally talk with, do favors for, that we don't do for others? At least partially because we might be able to gain something from them.

We might want something from them someday. Perhaps relatedly, are there people in our lives who we only talk with when we want something from them, when we think they might be useful to us?

So maybe the people in verses 2 to 4 show favoritism to the rich man because they think he might be useful to them. But either way, in our own lives, we need to be wary of that because, verse 1 again, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

And in this case, James actually has some specific reasons in verses 6 and 7 for why they shouldn't be showing favoritism to the rich of his day in particular. So in verses 6 and 7, he talks about their exploitation, their abuse, their abuse of the legal system, their blasphemy.

[11 : 58] He shows essentially, these are people who, if you're choosing to play favorites, these are the worst people to play favorites for. But interestingly, he doesn't lead with that argument.

Look at verse 5. Listen, my dear brothers and sisters, 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 to those who love him?

So before pointing out the earthly problems with favoritism, before pointing out the particular situation, he points us heavenward. In effect, he asks, well, what does God think about this?

And what's the answer? Well, God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom. In a sense, James is saying here, okay, I see the rich and poor man and how you treat them.

There is a wealth that matters, but it's not physical wealth because it's better to be rich in faith than in gold. And the apostle Peter actually makes this point quite explicitly in 1 Peter chapter 1.

[13 : 02] He says that his readers' faith is of more worth than gold, which even though it is refined by fire, still ultimately perishes. Meanwhile, the inheritance of God's children, he says, will never perish, spoil, or fade.

So the primary reason not to show favoritism is not earthly or self-interested. It points towards God's choice, towards his children, those whom he loves and those who love him.

But as we hear the word love, we might need to be a bit careful around that as well. So when we think of favoritism, we might be tempted to think, oh, you know, I don't show favoritism to this person.

When I'm doing favors for that person or helping them out or becoming friends with them, that's not favoritism. That's just me showing them God's love. And James preempts us in that.

Look at verse 8. If you really keep the royal law found in scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right. Well, so far so good.

[14:02] But, verses 9 and 10, 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.

So it's like James is saying here that favoritism and showing God's love towards someone can look very similar. In a sense, James isn't saying here, oh, the way you said to that man here's a fine seat for you, that's absolutely wrong.

Now what he's pointed to is the contrast between the two. He's saying the way that you treated the man saying, oh, you know, sit here, this is great, like, I want to treat you really well. That's fine. But it's the contrast then with what they treat, how they treat the poor man in terms of the, no, you stand over there, you sit at the floor by my feet.

That's the distinction between what love is and what favoritism looks like. And we need to examine our motives properly. So if there are some people to whom we find it much easier to show God's love than others, we need to understand why is that?

In the context of God's love for the poor, the weak, the outcast, in the context of the church specifically, if he invites people into his family, how can we insult or dishonor them?

[15:22] As verse 6 puts it, you have dishonored the poor. If we do treat people differently in that way, then it might show something important about our hearts.

So verse 1 starts out by talking about believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. Now, hopefully, no big surprises here. James expects his readers to love Jesus.

He expects us to love him. He expects us to really love his glory and who he is as a person and what he has done. We're supposed to love his glory. But there are different kinds of love and different kinds of glory, aren't there?

There's sort of loving a good burger or a good meal of any sort. There's loving your parents, loving your children, loving a significant other. They're all very different.

And then there's a difference between glory of God and the glory of man. And this is something that I think Alex was mentioning earlier. himself. He says, it's so easy for our eyes to get distracted, but we want to fix our eyes on Jesus.

[16:28] It's oh so easy as well for our hearts to get turned and twisted so that we focus on the glory of man. And that could be, in this case, like the glory of wealth as it is in this passage.

Man's gold ring, fine clothes. Maybe for us today it would be a car, a house, a salary. It could be the glory of celebrity being thought of as really important.

It could be the glory of charisma, so being instantly liked by everyone, the glory of intelligence. Oh, that person seems to know everything. And as we start looking towards those people, as we start turning our hearts towards that type of glory, we find ourselves turning away from the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Look at the end of chapter 1 with me, right before the start of this passage. So James chapter 1, verse 27. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

What God considers as pure and faultless, looking after orphans and widows in their distress. Orphans and widows, shorthand for the very types of people who can give us nothing.

[17:47] Who have nothing to give us. Who have no glory to show, as it were. And in our passage, that's the poor man. What about in our lives? I need to ask myself, when was the last time someone received my love, my care, who seemed utterly unrewarding in every way?

And as I ask myself that, I'll pass on the question to you as well. When was the last time someone received your love who seemed utterly unrewarding in every way?

This chat about favoritism is no small thing. You can kind of tell that from how we're covering the passage in general. But also look at verses 11 and 12.

He who said you shall not commit adultery also said you shall not murder. If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. Sorry, I meant to say verse 11. Verse 12 we'll come on to a little bit later. But adultery and murder, okay, well, those are things we see as pretty serious crimes, right? Possibly two of the most serious offenses possible.

[18 : 55] If you even go back to the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament, you have commandment number six and commandment number seven there, do not kill, do not commit adultery. They're on that list.

So why does James bring those up here? Well, in part it might be to emphasize the seriousness of favoritism, right? When two things he brings up for comparison with it are two of the most serious offenses possible, then we can get the idea that favoritism is actually a serious matter too.

Believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not murder, grand we know that, must not commit adultery, we know that, and verse one, must not show favoritism. It's that serious a crime against God.

But it's also a crime against the unfavored. So if we take two people here, and I'll try not to start them with the same letter so they won't get mixed up, let's take Adam and let's take Joe.

Apologies if your name is Adam or Joe, by the way. So suppose Adam murdered Joe, but he didn't decide to try to get with Joe's wife.

[19 : 58] Would we say that Adam is guiltless? Obviously not. If Adam decided instead, you know, I'm not going to murder Joe, but I'm going to commit adultery with Joe's wife, we wouldn't call him guiltless again just because he's avoided murder this time, would we?

In the same way, if we avoid both of those, but we still show favoritism, then the end of verse 11 applies to us too. You have become a lawbreaker. And as verse 10 says, whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

Now, this is a verse, we're just coming out of our summer camp season. This is one of the verses that I tend to use when talking about the gospel with children, sort of eight to twelve year olds or thereabouts, as part of explaining what the gospel is.

Because in order to get the good news of the gospel, you need to understand where we start off.

We start off in a bad relationship with God because of the sin in our lives. So I will say to them, for example, Romans chapter 6, verse 23, the wages of sin is death.

James chapter 2, verse 10, as we have in this passage here, if you keep the whole law and yet stumble at just one point, you are guilty of breaking all of it. Or Romans chapter 3, verse 23, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

[21 : 15] But one question I got at a camp recently was, what is the glory of God? What's glory, what's the glory like? What does it look like? As verse 1 tells us, we see it in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

If we think about what Jesus did, what did he do? Did he show favoritism? Did he effectively say, oh, you know, these people are useful to me, I'll pick these people out, those people are not, we'll send those people away.

Well, if he had, we'd all be doomed, wouldn't we? There would be no gospel, there would be no good news because all have sinned and fall short of his glory. Jesus could not benefit from showing us mercy.

In fact, that mercy came at a great cost to him on the cross. So if he were solely interested in this dispassionate kind of justice, then he could have judged us without mercy.

He could have judged us under the law that brings death. The law which says, you know, here's your life's work, here's your sin, and the salary that you deserve for this. The salary you receive at the end of the month, in this case, at the end of your life, is death.

[22 : 28] He could have discarded us, he could have thrown us away. Or, he could have said, you know what, clean yourselves up. Make yourselves rich in faith. Make yourself useful to me.

Then I'll do something for you. Then I might show favor to you. Instead, the very hands that could discard us are pierced with nails, driven into the crossbeam for his crucifixion.

And what impact does that have on how our passage ends? Well, from verse 12 onwards, we're to speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.

Not justice, not punishment, but freedom. But reading on, judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

Well, what is mercy? Not showing compassion or forgiveness to someone whom it's within your power to harm. To harm through favoritism or in any other number of ways. And that idea of judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

[23 : 37] That can annoy us sometimes. That can make us go, oh, that seems off somehow. But if we even think about the Lord's Prayer and what's said in that, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

So if we're praying that prayer and we are not forgiving others, if we are not showing mercy to others, we are asking God not to show mercy to us. That's the literal way what we're saying. Similarly, there's a parable Jesus gives of a man who owes a massive debt to a ruler and he begs the ruler for that debt to be cancelled and it is cancelled. And then that same man goes out into the street and says, oh, you owe me a small amount of money.

I'm going to put you in prison over that. And what happens? Well, ultimately, word of that reaches the ruler and he says, no, you cannot do that. You are not going to benefit. You will be judged without mercy.

You have not shown the same mercy that has been shown to you. And yet, at the end here, we have that mercy triumphs over judgment. And we can see that most clearly on the cross where we, the undeserving, can find compassion, forgiveness, and freedom from the sin that enslaved us.

[24 : 51] Now, when we go to meet our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, either when we die or when this world comes to an end, we will not be shouting at him, clamoring towards him and saying, give us justice, give us justice, give us judgment.

We'll be crying out to him for love and for mercy. His mercy triumphs over judgment and we are to show that same love and mercy to others. As I close, I want to read to you two verses of the song that we're going to sing in a couple of minutes together, which I think sums up quite a lot of this, quite poetically.

Starting by talking about our own situation, individually, before the cross. It says, Beneath the cross of Jesus, I find a place to stand and wonder at such mercy that calls me as I am.

For hands that should discard me hold wounds which tell me, come beneath the cross of Jesus, my unworthy soul is one. And then following on from that in response, we have, well, beneath the cross of Jesus, his family is my own.

Once strangers chasing selfish dreams, now one through grace alone. How could I now dishonor the ones that you have loved?

[26 : 11] Beneath the cross of Jesus, see the children called by God. Let's pray together and then we'll sing. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word.

We thank you for how it speaks into our lives. We thank you that Jesus, even though we could not give him anything of value, came to die for us.

We thank you for that sacrifice. We thank you that through that we can receive mercy instead of judgment. I pray that you will help us through our lives today and throughout the coming weeks, months and years.

We pray that you will help us to live in such a way that reflects the mercy we've been shown, to show compassion to others, not to show favoritism. In Jesus' precious name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Thank you. As I said, we're going to sing together now a song that you've heard two verses of. There's another verse out.