

Faith in Deeds vs Faith Alone

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[0 : 0 0] In our 40 acts for Lent, we've come to this point where we come to talk about favoritism. And favoritism comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. I don't know about you, whether you were part of that humiliating act, I hope they still don't have it at school, where you lined up to play sport and then they chose two leaders and they would come out. Now you knew, you knew whether you were going to be chosen or whether you were going to be last, not on your ability, but whether that person happened to be your mate. And so this humiliating act of us and James, James, James, James cuts right to the heart of this this morning and says, because all the time the Pharisees were saying, you know, we're in this club and therefore you're not part of our favorites, so you don't belong. And because we all know how easy it is to mix with people just because we like them, but don't want to be with them. Here's a little clip. It's a true story.

I didn't want to come into serious life, but if it wouldn't have woke up, I wouldn't have been bothered. I felt pathetic. Well, I was pathetic. And I went in the archway, just sat with my head down because I didn't want people to see me. And I didn't want to see anybody else.

I've seen that look before and that's when you know someone's at rock bottom.

It was a miracle because I just thought this stranger, this angel has come to help me. So I owe it to him, but more so, I owe it to myself. Over the year ago, I was sleeping in the doorway. Now, thanks to my fellow soldier. I'm a little bit of a roof on my head. I can tell you that you made a huge difference to that man. Absolutely. Would you like to meet him at some point?

Yeah, I'd like to hear from him and meet him. Stephen, Phil. Yes, isn't it? Good to see you.

[2 : 3 2] Thank you, man. Looking well, man. Looking well. Look at you. Look at you. Look at you. I just want to tell you what you're doing for me. You've done everything for me. I just didn't get anywhere. I didn't really have any friends. It was just the loneliness and despair was failing. And then you came along. I can't thank you enough. I can barely, I can't thank you.

I can't. You've just changed my life. 1 Samuel 16, 7, it says, the Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. And we elevate ourselves often, don't we, and others when we judge them too quickly. And in the first few verses, we connect with this reading. You know, we probably, in this story that we've heard this morning in Scripture, we probably saw him. He parked his nice new car. He's dressed very well. He's wearing a very nice ring. And he's going to come into the coffee shop because that's where we chose to drink. So it must be a good place. So therefore, he is one of us. And he therefore comes and joins us. And then this person, filthy in dirty rags, comes in to the coffee shop. He's holding his bag close to his chest.

He's probably all that he's got in life. And you notice how people start to move away from him. And people are sat there thinking, I hope he gets a takeaway so that he doesn't come and sit next to me.

That cuts at the heart of our favouritism. That cuts at the heart of who we are, how we judge, and how we should be, how James and Jesus is saying that we should be to others, that we should meet them where they are. And so easily, favouritism can infect and dilute our Christian faith.

The issue that favouritism and judgment sit very closely together. I know that. And you know that. And James cuts to the heart in the very first verses. Have you not discriminated amongst yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Yes, we have, James. And I will put my hand up to that. And I try, and I want to be more like you, Lord. I want to be non-judgmental. I want to be there to be with people, to meet people where they are, to be exactly where they are. Listen, my brothers and sisters, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the poor world to be rich in faith, and to inherit the kingdom for those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor. All the way through scripture, that word cuts me deep for James, because we are called to the poor. Poor in spirit, poor in whatever way they are. Poor in whatever way they are. But we are called there not to have favouritism. And like me, Jesus, I pray as he speaks to me, doesn't discriminate. And James is saying here this morning, you know, you see favouritism. It can infect our behaviour. It has the dangers of making us a club class people. This is who we like being around. And this is the way we stay.

[6 : 05] And inviting people who are like us to be part of our club. Is that a church thing? Is that a church thing? Because sadly it is. Look at Christians, how they gather in preference-based groupings. I don't like this church, so I'll go there because I like what they do. And it's like-minded people. Move churches to people who have a preference in this style of worship. There is a danger of gathering around those who we like and moving away from those who we don't. And James raises the bar for us. He raises the bar for us this morning on discipleship. And says, enough is enough.

We're going to do this. If you are truly calling yourselves brothers and sisters, then you raise the bar and you come and you do not show favouritism. Guard your heart. It's a great piece of advice that I was given many years ago by one of my vicars. And said, guard your heart. Because title, status, privilege in everything that the world tempts us with can draw us away from the heart of God.

May surprise you, but tomorrow I'll become a real vicar. I don't know what I've been doing for all the rest of this time. But it's interesting that you get a couple of emails from people who said, welcome to the club. No, no, not at all. Can favouritism affect our behaviour? Yes, it can. Can it draw us away from God's purpose? Yes, it can. Can we counter it? Can we put it in check? James says, yes, we can.

We can get back to as we were supposed to be. Who is my brother and sister? Jesus. They asked him and he answered them. Yes, it is the person sitting next to you. Yes, it is the person. And it's really nice to be here. But it also reminds us of here we are called to be alongside in life. And for those that sadly we tend to avoid. We need to remember, and James reminds us strongly today of what I call him, because we are children of the same heavenly Father. We are the same. We are all loved by God. And if you, like me, have at times in my life felt like the cuckoo in the nest of Christianity, you are loved by God.

You are loved and accepted as those that we are called to reach. At New Wine this year, I was worshipping in an area called the Impact Zone. It was very nice. There was this big sort of, it was all lit like the British Isles. And there were mostly people there that were from inner city Manchester, Birmingham, London. And each of them were encouraged to go and just lay a candle where they had a heart for their city. Manchester was nicely lit up and so was London and so was Birmingham.

[9 : 24] And there's this wonderful candle where Clevedon is, because that's where I placed it. And the humbling thing was, is I was looking at Manchester and London and Birmingham and saying, Lord, do you want me there? Because if that's where you're calling me, you know that we will give up tomorrow and we will go. I felt a strong call to the poor. With that, there's a guy that comes over and stands next to me. I'll be totally honest, I could smell him before he got to me. He was a lovely guy. And he just knelt beside me. He was from an inner city church in Manchester and he prophesied into my life. And he said, you're called to the poor, but it's right under your nose. It's not here, it's not there, it's not there. It's here. It's where you are, that you are called to the poor and the poor in spirit. Do you know, I didn't realise until that time how complacent I'd been, how my calling had been, got nice and cosy and things like that. I think again, that wake up call that we have this morning from James. James knew there was nothing outwardly spectacular to draw people to Jesus. It was the godly character in him that drew people to him. And if godly character will draw people to us, then surely we look for the godly character in others to draw us to them, no matter what state they've been in. Our vision for this church is to reach out and that's not a selective process.

It isn't just to the people who are nicely cleaned up in the way we are. And often it's messy church. And messy church is every Sunday. Messy church should be who we are during the week. Messy church is people like us who maybe in all our struggles are messy in our own ways, which amaze us to reach and come alongside other people. To Corinthians, Paul nails it, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that through his poverty that we might become rich. We are rich through his poverty. We are so rich and empowered and enabled to go and meet people exactly where they are. Do you feel that gut-wrenching thing in you to do that?

Because that's what we're called to do. This is about empowering and enabling and encouraging on a Sunday in that strong thing to go out and do what Jesus has called us to do. It's part of the oath. I remember you swear an oath when you're a police officer and you swear that you will serve without favour or affection. It doesn't matter who it is. I don't choose. But we go to meet people where exactly where they are. Don't judge. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. So what does that look like? We've come full circle. We're coming in. Can we be Christ-like, effective in our humility and not show favouritism? Whatever that might look like.

Where is it in our hearts that we are drawn to just like the people who are like us? Because that isn't what I want. I don't want to be around people who are just like Clive Jennings. What a boring place that would be. I want to be alongside people who Christ calls us to. You know that we can let our heart actions be louder than our words in these 40 acts. What would our brothers and sisters say of us?

We hear it time and time again. You lock yourselves away. You're not out there. Actually, this church is out there. This church more and more is out in the community serving where we should be. And we say more, Lord.

[13 : 50] More of that. Free us to do that. Free each and every one of us in the power of your Holy Spirit to be where we need to be. Philippians 2, 5, 7. I think it's the last slide. In your relationship with another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who being in the very nature of God did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. That hurts. Rather, he made himself nothing by taking on the very nature of the very nature of the servant, being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. We have an opportunity in this 40 acts to make a difference, to challenge what to the very core of who we are.

What is our favoritism? Where do we judge? Where should we be free to be alongside those who call us? The religious club had an outing one day. They thought it would be a great idea to go and stone a woman for adultery. It's what they did. It's a nice way of judging people. Notice that they didn't choose the man to stone, who had also been in adultery. But what they did is they picked up their stones and the woman was hauled out in front of them. Jesus came along and drew a line and wrote in the sand.

He said, if anybody is without sin, you can throw the first stone. They realized that they were all sinners. They hadn't understood about the grace and love of God, unlike this woman.

And I pray more and more that as they heard those words and we hear those words, that we will drop our stones. Stones that we're tempted to throw at other people. Stones that we're often choosing to judge. Stones where we don't want to get alongside and support and raise up those who are in need of the love and grace of God.

Because I am. And I need them. Jesus wasn't part of the club and he made it clear that day. Because the only person that was able to throw that stone, if a stone was to be thrown, was Jesus.

[16 : 34] Because he was the sinless one. And he didn't. And he reached down and he raised her up. As we just reflect on that, let's just watch this clip.

And ask ourselves in our own hearts, where are we reaching here? What side of the line are we on? Are we on the Jesus side? Lifting her up?

Or are we ready to pick up stones?