

Favouritism Exposed

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[0 : 00] James chapter 2 and verses 2 through 7. James chapter 2, verses 2 through 7. One of the things which is interesting about world travel is seeing how customs in various countries differ from one another.

For example, if you should eat out at a restaurant in South Korea, it is considered an insult to tip your waiter. But if you should eat out at a restaurant in the United States, it is considered an insult not to tip your waiter.

Whenever we eat out as a family, unless the food or the service has been notably bad, we tend to leave a tip. But if we were in Seoul and tried to leave a tip, the waiters would be offended by the gesture.

What seems polite to us in the West is plain rude to those in the East. What seems no big deal to us in Scotland can be a very big deal to those in other countries.

For example, it's no big deal for us to cross a road. We need to make sure there's no traffic coming, but really we can cross the road whenever we like. But I believe in Germany, roads can only be crossed at designated crossings.

[1 : 27] To cross anywhere else is a rather serious offence. What seems no big deal to us may be a big deal to the Germans. And who is to say that they or the South Koreans are wrong and that we are right?

Well, certainly not me. Favoritism, it would seem, was no big deal to the early Jewish churches in James' day.

And it would seem that perhaps favoritism is no big deal to the Christian church in the West today. But the truth is that what isn't a very big deal to us is a very big deal to God.

For him, showing favoritism to one group over another group is about as bad as it gets.

Discriminating on the basis of wealth, appearance, status, gifting, is a very ugly sin to the God who in the gospel shows equal grace and mercy to all who come in faith to Jesus Christ.

And let's face it, if we are to be doers of the word and not merely listeners, it's not God who has to get with our customs. But we, you have to get with his.

[2 : 52] Well, last week from James chapter 2 verse 1, we saw the rotten heart of favoritism exposed. And we show that it is at best sub-Christian and at worst anti-Christian.

Now in James 2, 2 through 7, James gives us a worked example of favoritism in practice. And then he proceeds to expose the sinfulness and darkness of such favoritism.

He exposes it for what it is. Against Christ. And against everything the grace of Christ may stand for.

The worked example itself is self-explanatory. Two men come into a gathering of God's people. It's by no means certain that this is a regular gathering for worship.

It may be a meeting at which a judgment between these two men is to be made. Perhaps a discipline case where the church must adjudicate between the conduct of a rich Christian, who because of his social superiority is pursuing a poor Christian for the repayment of a debt or some such case.

[4 : 10] Albeit these verses could apply to either situation. A normal meeting of the church worship on the Lord's Day or an extra special meeting set up to make a judgment between two Christians.

The general details are pretty self-evident. The rich man comes in with a gold ring in his finger. These kinds of rings were worn by the Roman equestrian class.

A group of very high class people who had attained to senior status in Roman society. He is very wealthy and carries the appearance of someone who is very wealthy and very important.

He's invited to sit in the best of seats, the very best in the house. The poor man comes in on the rich man's coattails.

He has no rings in his fingers. He is dressed in rather shabby clothes, the kind of clothes we might expect a beggar to be dressed in. He is told by the church, you stand there, or literally, you sit under my footstool where the dogs are.

[5 : 24] The important word in this passage is in verse 3. It is special attention, special attention. The rich man with high status and a high appearance is shown special attention.

Whereas the poor man is treated no better than an animal. In fact, you would almost get the impression from the text that these Christians would have been happier if this poor man had not shown up at all.

Because he's more of a distraction than anything else. By contrast, that rich man, well, he's an asset. And so they fawn over him.

And they slobber over him. Because they think that somehow his presence among them might confer upon them a higher status, dignity, or wealth than they currently have.

Now, it would seem that these kind of things happened in the early Christian church all the time. It is most definitely the case that this kind of thing happens in the Christian church, especially in the West today.

[6 : 35] The rich, in whatever way they are rich, are fawned over. The poor, in whatever way they are poor, are treated with indifference.

We toady up to the rich because we think that in doing so they might add something to our ministries. We dismiss the poor because they are no more than a drain on our limited resources. And by and large, let's face it, they can be rather hard work. And we say, well, that's no big deal, right? There are bigger sins to address in the Christian church today, I am sure.

Who says that favoritism is not the biggest thing, biggest sin in the church today? Who says that favoritism is not the biggest sin of the Western church today?

Certainly by the sheer volume of material James devotes to it, favoritism is a far bigger problem in the Christian church than we think it is.

[8 : 00] And to God, it is repugnantly ugly and distastefully sinful. We must deal with it.

And so, between verses 2 and 7, James gives us five reasons why the exercise of favoritism in this setting, that of the rich man and the poor man in this worked example, is plain wrong in the eyes of God.

It is, first of all, against moral judgment. It is, secondly, against family ethics. It is, thirdly, against God's attitude.

Fourthly, it is against natural justice. And fifth, it's against the Christian faith. What's no big deal to us, tipping a waiter, is a very big deal in South Korea.

And any demonstration of favoritism, whatever it might be, though it may be no big deal to us, is a very big deal to God.

[9 : 11] First of all, then, showing favoritism is against moral judgment. It is against moral judgment. In verse 4, James, reflecting on the worked example, asks the question, Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Above the highest court in the land, the Old Bailey in London, is a statue of Lady Justice.

She carries in her left hand a set of balancing scales and in her right hand a sword. There is in the British legal system that double function of the courts, that of deciding upon the merits of a case and that of exacting punishment.

But what's most remarkable about the statue of Lady Justice above the Old Bailey, is that she wears a blindfold. She can't see who she's judging.

She is basing her judgments not on appearances, but on what she can hear on the evidence. The message is this, Our justice system, at its best, is no respectative persons.

[10 : 31] Lady Justice can't see whether it's a prince before her in the dock or a beggar. The standard of justice is the same for both of them.

So there is in the British legal system, in theory anyway, no favoritism. It is not prejudiced in that it makes no prejudgment based on someone's status or appearance or abilities.

One of the things that makes our blood boil as citizens is if a judge has been bribed before the case begins by the defendant, or if a judge, by virtue of his friendship with the defendant, should be

biased toward them.

That's why at the beginning of every trial, a judge in the British legal system must solemnly swear that there is no conflict of interest involved. Well, let's go back from Lady Justice to the book of James and the worked example given us of favoritism in the early church.

What does it mean to discriminate among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? It means that Lady Justice should take off her blindfold and make her judgments by appearances and not by evidence.

[11 : 55] It means to make judgments by face and not fact. To demonstrate favoritism in the church is to act with prejudice towards someone purely because they don't have a gold ring on their finger and they don't possess an Armani suit.

The blindfold is off and we become immoral judges. How can this poor man expect justice when those who are judging him are predisposed against him?

How can he be expected to be treated fairly when he is being judged by his appearance and not by his actions?

Now this man must be extremely poor and he may be extremely poor because he's been faithful to the name of Jesus Christ and has suffered persecution for it.

Never mind, in the church, in the one place he should be honoured for bearing persecution for the name of Jesus Christ, he is insulted and disrespected.

[13 : 10] We've become the very same immoral judges we despise in our legal system who judge a case before they've heard the evidence because they've been bribed or because they've got a long-standing friendship with the defendant.

Fairytism goes against everything we hold dear, if at all we are fair-minded. I'm sure you don't, and neither do I, want to be part of a country where the justice system is weighted against the poor and in favour of the rich.

We call such justice systems tin-pot dictatorships and dysfunctional, and rightly so. But with frightening regularity, such dysfunctionality and favouritism is displayed in the church, perhaps even in our own hearts also.

It is against natural justice. Secondly, showing favouritism, in this way, is against family ethics. It is against family ethics.

James continues, the beginning of verse 5, listen, my beloved brothers. We talked a bit about this last week, so what I'm doing here is reinforcing this message.

[14 : 31] The Bible is filled with families destroyed by favouritism. We have Jacob and how his display of favouritism toward Joseph drove Joseph's brothers mad.

We have the exact opposite with Jesse. Rather than show favouritism to his youngest son, Jesse was embarrassed by him and hid him from sight.

Families are blown apart by the foolishness of favouritism in the parent. Every child needs to know that they are equally special.

But what about the church of Jesus Christ? Are we an institution? Are we a business? Are we a club? Or what are we?

We are a family. We are made up of brothers and sisters. We are equally special to our Heavenly Father. And he loves each one of us with an infinite, eternal, and unchangeable passion.

[15 : 33] There is no fairitism with God. Our father doesn't have David's. Our father only has Joseph's. We are all extra special to him and he loves us all dearly.

We are beloved of God. Can you believe that? That we are all equally beloved of God? Perhaps we might think that the rich man with his gold ring and his fine clothes and his bright appearance, perhaps we think that he is loved by God.

By contrast, we look down on that poor man with his shabby clothes and his dirty appearance and we think to ourselves, well, God doesn't really care about him after all.

And James says, not at all. They are brothers. They are equally loved by our Heavenly Father and they equally belong in the church of Jesus Christ.

That is, as Paul will go on to say in a few years' time from when James was written, no Jew, no Gentile, no slave, no free, no male, no female, but in Christ all are one.

[16 : 49] This is the Christian family. If you want to show favoritism here or you want to be shown special attention by other Christians because of your status, because of your wealth, because of your appearance, because of your gifting, this family is not the place for you.

You don't belong here. Here, in this place, we are all equal and the only preferential treatment is when we prefer the interests of others ahead of our own.

So favoritism of whatever variety is against our family ethic as beloved children of our Heavenly Father. If we want Him as our Father, then we must have each other as brothers and sisters.

Third, showing favoritism is against God's attitude. It's against God's attitude. James continues, Has God not 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?

James is using words which should be familiar to us because back in James 1, verse 12, he spoke of the blessedness of those who endure under trial. for they shall receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him.

[18:22] Receiving the crown of life back there in chapter 1 and verse 12 is the same as inheriting the kingdom here in chapter 2, verse 5. These poor people, they're dressed in shabby clothes and they're being told to sit on the floor and keep their mouths shut.

they stand to inherit the kingdom of God and wear the crown of eternal life. No one thinks another man poor who he knows will one day inherit a fortune.

It's the stuff of many stories. A child is set upon his 21st birthday to inherit vast wealth but up until his 21st birthday he is to be treated like any other child.

No one can tell that one day that child shall be super rich but if they had known they would have treated him very differently.

They would have shown him respect rather than bully him or force him to sit on the floor at their feet. this is the future destiny of those faithful poor who have persevered under the trial of their faith.

[19:48] They shall be wealthier than the wealthiest of men here and now for they shall wear the crown of life not a gold ring and they shall inherit the kingdom of God.

That's what lies in the future. by reason of what lies in the future by reason of what this poor man you are discriminating against shall one day be you should not show favoritism toward him.

But in the present James says this poor man is rich in faith. He may not be rich in wealth. He has no gold rings.

He has no fine clothes. His appearance is dirty. His appearance is unkempt. But he is rich in faith.

The implication James is setting here is that this rich man may well be wealthy in this world's terms. But he's incredibly poor in faith. Look then at that poor brother or sister, however you wish to define poverty and wealth, whether it's economic, whether it's popularity, health, whether it's gifting, however you wish to discriminate against them.

[21:08] Look at him. Look at her. She is richer in faith than you are because she had to overcome obstacles you would never have had to.

He's had to persevere against challenges which might well have destroyed you. she's rich in faith.

That's the reality in the present and that's why we must not discriminate against the poor.

But having established present and future reasons, James now looks back into the mists of eternity, somewhere we cannot see, and he asks the question, has not God chosen them?

Has not God chosen them? Who are we to argue with God's sovereign election of these poor people to be his? That before the sun began to shine and the tide began to ebb and flow, God had elected these poor people to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved?

Who are we to argue with the justice and the wisdom and the love of God's sovereign election of the poor? Would you rather he had elected only rich people as opposed to the poor?

[22:30] By what means then would his election be judged? Not according to grace anymore, but according to works. Not according to the glory of God anymore, but according to the glory of man.

So you see, to show favoritism is against God's attitude in the past of electing these poor Christians to eternal life. It is against God's attitude in the present because he says of them that they are rich in faith.

And it is against God's attitude in the future because these very same poor people will one day inherit the very kingdom of God. Therefore, perhaps it's time to change our tune and develop the same attitude as God himself.

The fourth reason why we must not show favoritism is that it is against natural justice.

It is against natural justice. I don't want to spend too much time on this point because I'm in a hurry to get to the last point, but consider with me the total questions James asks in verse 6.

[23 : 44] Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? So here we are as the church and we're insulting the poor by telling them to sit on the floor and we're toadying up to the rich when inviting them to sit in the best seat on the house.

So who were these Jewish Christians being ultra nice to? Answer, the very same people who had made them poor in the first place. The very same rich people who were taking them to court for the repayment of debts.

It's a betrayal of natural justice. Listen carefully to me here. It may just be my own observation, but never once in all my years of being minister of Glasgow City Free Church have I ever seen an influential person in our church who has not had his or her own reasons for coming here.

And at times we've fawned over them and we've made much of them, but they have never reciprocated nor given us anything in return.

They have not advocated for us as a church, nor have they added their voices to those pleading for the fair treatment of Christians in today's society, not even once.

[25 : 14] I'm sorry, folks, but my years of toadying up to influential people in the eyes of the world are over.

It might seem respectful to them, but it is against natural justice. Perhaps you can persuade me of the error of my ways.

And then lastly, the last reason why we must not show favoritism is that it is against Christian faith. It is against Christian faith. I do hope that James is making a compelling enough case for us to realize that though showing favoritism may be no big deal for us, it is a most serious sin in the eyes of our gracious, loving, righteous God.

And why is that? It is because at its most basic level, it is not our reputation which is at stake in the way these rich people strut around and expect to be given special attention by us and by others. It is not our reputation which has been dragged into the dust, it is that of our glorious God. Who after all are these rich men compared to the exceeding majesty of the exalted Christ?

[26 : 39] the Scottish author John Buchan wrote two things which I will never tire of repeating. First, the best of men are men at best.

The best of men are frail, they are just men like ourselves, they are no better, they are no worse, they are just like us. They are gold rings, they are fine clothes and they are handsome appearances, they hide insecure hearts.

Secondly, Buchan wrote in the courts of the morning, what is the glory of man when it all ends in six feet of dirt?

What is the glory of man when it all ends in six feet of dirt? Death comes to us all, whether we are poor or whether we are rich.

This rich man, in whatever way we define wealth, whether it's economic or social or giftedness in the church, he is strutting about like a peacock and he expects everyone around him to pay special attention to him, to show favoritism to him.

[27 : 51] He is forgetting what he really is. He is just a man and he is destined for six feet of dirt. And more seriously, by drawing attention to himself, he is robbing God the glory of his name.

Who is the most important person at that meeting of the early church? Surely not that man. Surely not the rich man.

No, it is the exalted presence of God by his Holy Spirit. But can you hear the conversation at the church door at the end of the meeting?

one Christian says to the other Christian, we're highly favored today as a church because a rich man was in our meeting. Rather, the conversation should be, we're always highly favored as a church because the risen Christ by his Spirit is with us.

Our God will share his glory with no man and the proclamation of his gospel with no one else. No favoritism here in the church.

[29 : 05] None at all. It is an attack on the very glory of God and the freedom of grace in the gospel. So we close with this question which I'd like to think that we could spend some time by ourselves applying.

What are some of the ways in which we may discriminate between people and on the basis of the judgments we make about them treat them with special attention and fawn over them in the church?

What are some of the ways in which we discriminate between people and on the basis of the judgments we make about them treat them with special attention and fawn over them in the church?

Could it be that our respectable customs are in fact deeply offensive to God? Let us pray. Lord, forgive us for ever having shown special attention to others when they come into our church. Forgive us ever, oh Lord, for showing more respect than a man is due. Forgive us, Lord, for disrespecting the poor in whatever way we define poverty.

[30 : 28] Give us grace to answer this question for ourselves, soberly asking ourselves, have we discriminated against one another? Do we fawn over some people and disrespect others?

Why? And show us that the heart of the gospel is the heart of the grace of Jesus Christ, who loving all men gave himself on the cross.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.