

# No Favourites in the Family

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Preacher: Claire Nicholls

- [ 0 : 0 0 ] It's good to be with you this morning and to see how you're doing. And I've seen a lot of your faces before, but there's still people who have missed the two times I've preached here before.
- So it's good to meet you as well. So as Richard said at the beginning, I'm Claire Nichols. I'm Regional Minister for London Baptist, looking after 83 churches in South East London, of which you're one.
- Southwark fits in the South East district that kind of does a diagonal line down to Bromley. But that's normally divided into three, Southwark, Lewisham kind of area and the leafy suburbs around Bromley.
- So I'm really, you've been on my heart and my mind and I've been praying for you in your search for a minister. And I know that God has that person for you.
- He just needs to reveal that person to us. And so we as London Baptists are supporting you on this journey. And I know it's frustrating when it seems to go on and on.
- [ 1 : 1 0 ] But they're there. And because God's got a plan and his mission is important in Hearnhill. And I believe that. Let's pray together, shall we?
- Father God, we want to thank you for your word. We want to thank you for your promises and for the teaching that is in Scripture. And we pray, Lord, as we come to your word today, that you might speak to us.
- Lord, we pray that you might open our ears to hear you, open our eyes to see you, and open our hearts to be changed. And may the words of my mouth be honouring to you.
- Amen. So you can imagine this scenario, can't you, that James puts in front of us. Let's imagine three people walk into this church.
- It's quite early before the service. There aren't many people here, but you're here. And there are three visitors. One is a man. He's got quite short hair.
- [ 2 : 1 5 ] He's white. He's wearing a T-shirt with a St. George's cross on. He's wearing a hat. He hasn't taken it off. And he's playing with a cross that's on a thick chain around his neck.
- Person number two is a woman. She's wearing a headscarf. She looks Middle Eastern. The clothes seem to be wearing her instead of her wearing the clothes.
- She's got big, thick socks on. She's carrying two of those big bags for life that are full to the brim. Person number three.
- You look at them and they're smartly dressed. Looks like M&S, maybe. Take that as you will. You are the only non-visitor in the room.
- Who do you talk to first? Why? Who do you go on to talk to again? And why? Well, person one, he looks like the men who were pictured in the Unite the Kingdom march last week, doesn't he?
- [ 3 : 2 4 ] Depending on who you are, you might bristle a little bit. Are you that kind of church? Person number two. Clearly in need or wanting something.

They look homeless. Or at least they don't have a good place to live. It's unusual to see a person like that in Herne Hill. Does she belong here?

You might think that person number three looks a bit like you, even if you don't even shop in M&S.; A potential new member, perhaps? What goes through your mind when those three walk in?

All three of them actually look a bit shifty, to be honest. My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, must not show favouritism.

That is so challenging, isn't it? Favouritism is amazing Greek words. I don't normally do the Greek word in sermons, but this is a great one. It says *prosopolepsia*.

[ 4 : 34 ] I'm not going to say that again. It's a great word, isn't it? I love those long words. It's related to the Hebrew word meaning lifting up the face. Unjust favouritism to the powerful.

Who do you lift up your faces to? It's a word that's used in a few places in the Bible. It's used in Ephesians 6 verse 9 in relation to masters and slaves, reminding the readers that they must recognise that God sees masters and slaves as equals, and they need to be treated as so in the church.

In Colossians 3.25, no favouritism for who gets punished for wrongdoing. Everybody should be treated equally when it comes to justice. And Romans 2.11, no favouritism between Jews and Gentiles, as the church in Rome argued over whether Jewish Christianity or Gentile Christianity is best.

Should they follow the Torah? Should they follow the law? Should they get circumcised? That kind of thing. Paul reminds them that there is no favouritism. You can be Jew, you can be Gentile, you can belong. James has just introduced the letter in chapter 1 and told the reader to keep oneself from being polluted from the world.

Don't let the world leave its dirty smudge on you. How is that lived out? Well, James begins to explain how, with favouritism, and not to show it, it's not the place you expect him to start, really.

[ 6 : 07 ] You would think that not being polluted would mean wrapping yourself up so that the dirt doesn't hit you. Keeping with those who are more like you. The bubble wrap version of Christianity, where the world is out there and we're in here.

And there are still Christian groups who separate themselves off from the world because they don't want me to be polluted by those who are in the world. But that's not what James presents.

The Roman world that James knew was one that was fixed in a certain way of doing things, where the few had far more influence than the many. Whereas in our world, societal privilege is influenced by wealth, with education, with social status playing a secondary part.

In the Roman world, it was more complicated than that. Your standing in the Roman Empire was determined by the social order that was given. The oldest noble families had the power, unless they'd fallen from grace.

They had the power. Their wealth was concentrated in the ownership of land and in agricultural production. And you could only be part of that group if you were born into it.

[ 7 : 23 ] If you were born into the right family. And also you had enough money to make sure that that work continued. The next order in the social status was based solely on wealth.

And it included people like merchants and bankers and entrepreneurs. And they got all the government contracts. Sounds quite familiar, doesn't it? New money, we might say.

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New money, we might say. They couldn't hold the status of the 2%, but they were still important. And so those three groups, they made up about 10% of the population. And then there's 90% left.

And the 90% are still separated by status, depending on who they were born to, their birthplace, their gender, their wealth, their citizenship, their military career, their occupation.

[ 8 : 46 ] and the bottom of the pile would be the people from rural areas remember nothing good comes from Nazareth and city dwellers were the most important competition in cities to enter the top 10 percent was fierce and there were big expectations put on that 10 percent that they stayed in that 10 so they could stay in that 10 percent a lot of them would hold huge meals for the city those landowners in the city would hold huge meals they would operate what we call a patronage it showed how good they were they were like they were very beneficial for the community because they could put on these meals for the community the benefactors of these patronages the 90 percent were expected to really appreciate what these patrons were doing for them and to demonstrate their dependence on the patrons with very often public displays of flattery for those without the power it's about being the being in the right places to have perceived power if they were going to go up the social status and in the roman empire if you had wealth you could become the patron of a civic or religious collegium or society to make this happen and things like trade associations private clubs that kind of thing and and so they'd become they might get some money and then become a patron of that society and as patron they would have to be very generous and they would but then for that they would expect respect and each person would then make clear their own superiority because they know they've been able to provide and give gifts and be generous to that society that was the only way of moving up um so if someone like that or one of those rich richard 10 percent further up the the social status entered the room then the expectation would be that you would appreciate them because they have done good to you and they would be the first to be welcomed and they would be looked after well that's the context we're looking at this in so but here james is saying that actually the society has got this wrong this is not how new believers should behave if we are all equal in christ this is not how we behave but you can see how showing no favoritism could be offensive to the way the roman world worked in our world we have different but similar issues um consumerism is important to many people it's a way of life and i don't know about you but for me it feels more normal to ride that wave than not our effort to become the best we can often focuses on appearances on how we look how we dress our ability to provide and how much we're respected and looked up to because of that stuff rather than because of the person that we are we'd like to think it wasn't this way in church but there are so many issues i deal with in regional ministry that come down to two things money and who spends it and power and who yields it that's not how believers should behave scripture is clear on that there is to be no favoritism and we may need to be people who are offensive to the norm in our favoritism blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven blessed are those who mourn for

they shall be comforted blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be satisfied blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see god blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of god blessed are those who suffer persecution for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven that doesn't sound like the life of a roman patron of one who has power of the populist movements in our country today it's not the message that is proclaimed when a uniting flag is used to divide but it's there in scripture the overarching narrative is one where excluded people are included where those who trample on the poor are condemned where there is neither june or gentile neither slave nor free nor is there male or female there is no favoritism because we are all one in christ jesus what does that look like well james um gives us some kind of idea in the narrative but it means questioning for us questioning whether the culture of our churches is one that mirrors the kingdom of god or more that mirrors the culture around and where it's a mixture of the two which most churches are actually calling out when we've got it wrong we might be strong and clear on our opposition on certain things gun crime drug abuse the breakdown of traditional family values but we need to be just as strong and clear in our opposition to the more subtle things in our culture that find our way in and sometimes the cultural influence on our churches is not what we expect has professionalism superseded every member ministry in some places as some voices marginalized because of the way that we run our meetings is there a better seat for the person who looks like they may might fit in than the other two who we're naturally more suspicious of do people have to act in a certain way before they can properly belong we need to be asking those questions all the time i was with the minister this week in quite an affluent part of southeast london and his church um is quite different to the others in the area there are a lot of churches in that area as he seems in that church which you wouldn't expect in the kind of community that church is in a lot of not just one or two but a lot of what we might call chaotic people the people that he's working with are more like the people who were from a deprived estate like my former church in new addington in south croydon there there are a lot of people in that community whose circumstance in life have meant they are stuck in a cycle downwards because they haven't been given opportunity they haven't got resources those kind of things mental health the mental health systems in our country are so broken that it leaves broken people and they tend to be in that kind of community but this church in this affluent area it has a culture of hospitality which means that they welcome these people in and they quickly become part of the family it does mean that that church has a lot more issues to deal with social issues safeguarding issues relationship issues and understanding issues and i asked the minister why he thought that his church was different to the other ones in the local area and he said that he thinks that people travel to church from the nearest council estate

rather to his church and rather than go from church to church they choose to stay because they are loved and accepted as they are even those who leave because someone calls out their non-christ-like behavior which they do it's quite a conservative church and it isn't a case of anything goes they come back because they realize the welcome is still there it's not a perfect church by any means but they're trying their best and they're seeing fruit they celebrated celebrated five baptisms of new believers not people who've just transferred new believers at the beginning of september isn't that i think a church that is full of broken people as well as those who are not so broken who perhaps might help keep stability because we need those people too might be the kind of church that james is pointing at as he refers the readers to the royal law found in scripture where loving your neighbor as yourself is second only to loving god in the commandment league table that the Pharisees asked jesus about the followers of the law are so interested in which one's most important it means thinking about the circles that we're moving in and how we're seeing in those circles in the roman world it was normal for patrons to be highly thought of and their interactions with those lower in status were more likely to be when they're showing off their wealth through generosity marked by plaques on the wall and shouts of thankfulness because they've done great things they've helped people the lower in status owed them something they wouldn't have mixed with them for any other reason that's not the way it's meant to be we all should be challenged by this about who we spend our time with and how we select the people we choose company with because our culture it shows favoritism and we're all guilty of this i'm in a job that people don't expect someone like me to be in well some people not everyone i'm short i'm round i don't always brush my hair well and i've got what conscious bias means that when people picture a regional minister they don't always picture someone like me i am very conscious about the way i dress and the way i carry myself for certain situations sometimes i'll wear a dog collar because it's important to show my status so i don't get judged and i get respected i always will try and dress a bit smart on sundays i once went to when i was training for ministry i once went to a college with a friend a fellow student from the college we were senior students together and the first assumption from the group was that i was there as his wife i'm treated differently i'm respected differently to my colleagues because of who i am as a woman who is not from here or didn't and didn't go to one of the more respected colleges in the baptist union i have to prove myself more you may think well that's not fair i wouldn't do that but who have you pictured when you think about your next minister we need to challenge ourselves on that it's so easy to make assumptions depending on how someone appears and it works the other way too we can dress down to fit in i've been re-watching the crown that talks about the life of the royal family on netflix

and harold wilson has just become prime minister and there's a conversation between him and the queen where he explains that he is really more upper class than he appears as leader of the labour party and he'd rather smoke a cigar than a pipe but he puts on this persona so that people relate to him and i think it is not a secret that happens in politics today when you become like those who want to support you the world accepts you more and we all play to this even if we're not that person underneath the challenge to us in this james passage is the challenge that led samuel to anoint david as king human beings look at the outward appearance but god looks at the heart we need to think carefully about the circles we embrace and those that embrace us and what that tells us about how favouritism is seen perhaps the call in this passage is to think about why we move in the circles that we move in and why we reject some and not others even if it's just an underlying unconscious bias in their direction no favouritism is looking at the person in front of you taking that call to love them as your neighbour and remembering that they are a person made in the image of God and try not to judge them by what you initially see invite them into your circle even if at first glance they don't seem to belong you might find it's beautifully enriching it could be a total disaster but god will help us deal with that james faces a situation where the self-indulgent attitude of some in the congregation threatened to create a community that was more judgmental than merciful and he tells them that they will be judged instead they're trying to create a community that is more divisive than united and less loving to some than to others and this chapter says that this is not the way of God and calls that church back to being more like Jesus we're called to be imitators of Christ we need to try and do that our churches should be places of sanctuary where all three of the guests

I mentioned at the beginning can find a place to call home however shift they look they should be places where all three are cared for where disagreements happen in a way that is gracious and gentle and where the leaders of the church are trusted before they are judged they should be places where people can be who they are and we ask God to work on them to become more like Jesus there should be places where people can taste and see that God is good and knowing him and trying to follow his commands is a good way to live there should be places where worldly influence does not put you in a higher place when someone who has a higher place than someone who has nothing and where we pray for one another where we share our struggles and we don't point a finger of blame there should be places where all sinners that's every single one of us can find the ways that Jesus proclaimed and can respond to that and be made clean as Baptists we can be good at this in my home group in my church

[ 24 : 37 ] I'm a member of we've started watching the Baptist Historical Society videos they're called Radical Roots and they tell the stories of six significant Baptists over time and what unites those six stories spanning five centuries is that they all talk about their desire for equality against a backdrop of oppression where they share that reading scripture for themselves rather than how they were told to read it has changed the way they live that is something that is key to being a local Baptist church you read scripture together and you discern the mind of Christ together under the power of the Holy Spirit we believe this is the word of God and it's gifted to us for everything that we need for those six Baptists across the centuries it is clear that even though they come from different places their love for one another and their unique stories it abounds you are different to the other Baptist churches in the area every Baptist church is different and that's what's beautiful about being part of a Baptist family all of this is in our roots we are primarily relational and not institutional and we need to try and get along to make that work

Henry Newen writes that the message which comes to us in the New Testament is that the compassionate life is a life together James is striving for this in this passage as he argues that he argues against favouritism and instead of a favour in favour of a law that gives freedom that's verse 12 we're coming to nearly at the end compassion can be communal in nature you know that a community is compassionate together you can see it in them the Christian community is an antidote for the brokenness of the world it's where people should find healing and an answer to the desire to belong that could easily take people to places we would rather they not be this is a good place to belong let us welcome people in in Christian community we naturally become more compassionate because we share lives together we choose to trust and work alongside one another and are vulnerable with one another and that help builds that trust

James is very humble and honest in the way he writes in the way he speaks about this he cares enough to offer rebuke and we should do that sometimes but do it gently because James does it as a brother he addresses the brothers and sisters he doesn't address them as if he's their judge we need to remember that we are brothers and sisters and treat one another as if we are this passage begins with James describing Jesus Christ as the glory of God he calls us to avoid favouritism and live by the law that gives freedom Jesus modelled that life so let us be faithful and let us try and do the same Amen you