

'God has no favourites'

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Date: 27 September 2026

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[0:00] To keep your Bibles open to James chapter 2. And before I start, some of you observant ones who have been following the series along and I'll give you a copy for free. So he's right down the back. You can see him after church and be more than glad to give you. And you might even, you know, if you take him out for a coffee, he might read it out to you as well. But no, we have to keep moving because we want to try and keep pace with the other services in the morning as well. So apologies for that. So we're on to James chapter 2, verse 1 to 13 tonight. Now I'm going to start with asking for two volunteers to come up to pick a Cadbury favourite from this box. Now I have to say in the morning, they kind of took a few too many. So it's not that many to choose. Okay. Yep. Delaney, come.

One more. Okay, Brendan. Okay. Actually one more. Three. Yes. Raph. Okay. Come on, Raph. Okay. All right. Yeah. Yeah. You can even eat it now if you want. It's okay. I know it's before dinner. Now I wonder whether you sort of took close notice to how they picked the chocolates. Some of them actually looked in the box and, you know, chose their favourite. I think it was Delaney that just put her hand in the box and just took out what came out. That's good. Very random. And look, there's no judgment here, all right? Because it's natural, isn't it, for all of us to have our favourites. Favourite colour, favourite holiday spot, favourite football team that didn't make the grand finals. But in our passage today, James warns against having favourites in the church, right? Why? Because it's against God's command. So we want to try and work out the reason for this. And it's all there actually in the first verse. The main instruction for today is verse one. And it says, my brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

[2:44] Now, later on in the passage, which is bullet point number two, there will be three detailed reasons given as to why. But the overarching reason is actually found here. And I've coloured the words on the next slide. Why? Because we're believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. If Jesus is our glorious Lord, and that's very exalted language to call a Lord glorious, then knowing Him, and what He's done means we can't show favoritism. And then what happens in the next three verses is that James gives us a case study as it plays out in their weekly meeting, much like a church gathering for us. And so he says, suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. And here we're meant to see the contrast, okay, it's a bit like those ads that we have for those washing detergents, you know, like this one on the next slide, right? The fine clothes are described as dazzling white, and that's literally, fine clothes are dazzling white, that's what's in the Greek. And that's to be contrasted with the filthy old clothes of the other man. Probably not like that one, probably even worse, tattered, probably smelly, because the man is smelly. And then he goes on to say, 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, stand there, or sit on the floor by my feet, have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? And so as the case study shows, favoritism is the idea where people are treated differently based on outward appearances. And literally the word for favoritism there is to receive based on the face, right? And some of us Asians, we know all about face, don't we?

Is to judge someone on the face of it, how they look. But outward appearance also is a proxy for something else, isn't it? Because when we look at how a person dress, it kind of gives us, we think, an indication of how much they might be worth financially, or how much influence they have. And James says to do this is to judge with evil thoughts, which is not consistent with who Jesus is, whose own glory is shown not with pomp and ceremony, but through humility, and how he treated others was not based on how they looked as well. Now we know as well that this kind of behavior is actually not acceptable even in our secular wider society, right? We have anti-discrimination laws,

which means that we can't bar poor people from public transport, let's say, or public services like the health, like the hospitals, or you know, like the public library or things like that.

And so if that's the case in society, then how much more the church? And so James says that if you do something like this, your actions actually say more about you than it does about the person you're discriminating against. It says that actually you have evil thoughts in your heart, that your values are immoral, that you're proud, that you're greedy, because you're willing to ingratiate yourself with the rich in order to get a leg up in society. Now sadly, of course, even though we in Australia have laws against discrimination, I think that when we scratch beneath the surface, it's not very far before we find that actually there's still favoritism in our society, isn't there? Because, face it, the rich still get favors over the poor. You know, just give you some examples, there are things such as corporate events and networking. Now who do you think get invited to those kind of events?

Not the poor, right? But the rich. People who can pay to get a seat or ticket into those functions. And of course, when you get there, you know, if there's some politician, you know, some important person like a CEO of some big corporate, you know, people try and get around them so that they can hopefully get LinkedIn, right? Or maybe exchange those contact details to follow up later for those business opportunities. And sadly, that can happen at church as well. Now imagine if, for example, the archbishop visited one Sunday. And you know, we put on this lavish kind of supper afterwards.

[7 : 46] Not chicken chips, you know, but something much better, okay? And you know, we don't just go to Coles, you know, we go into the city to that special butcher that gets those meat that got flown in from who knows where, right? Wagyu only, right? And then everyone's fighting to sit next to him, serving him, you know, do you need more sauce? Do you want a special drink? Do you want a glass of wine? Not that we ever have wine, but you know, we'll find some. Now, I mean, I'm a bit over the top with all of this, but there's nothing wrong with being nice to the archbishop. So next time he does visit, please don't mistreat him. But would you do the same for a newcomer? You know, someone who's wandered off the streets, probably smelling like he hasn't showered for a few days. Would you give him the same or her the same attention that you might give the archbishop? Now, we may not be so blatant, but I think we still need to be careful, don't we? Week in, week out to check our motivations as to how we treat people, people that are in our midst right now even. Do we, for example, avoid certain people at church? Do we kind of work out who we don't want to sit to, sit next to at Chicken and

Chips tonight? You know, and having said that now, everyone's going to be watching who's going to be sitting to whom? And if so, why? Or for example, are you always respectful to me as the pastor or Andrew, but then you talk down to others when we are not around? Are you dismissive of the views of some because, you know, they're not the leaders of the church? All of these tends to show, doesn't it, that we are judging with evil thoughts. Now, the rest of the passage now spells out explicitly the reasons why this is wrong. So, verse 5 to 7, so we're at point 2, point A to A. James reasons, listen, 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 those who love him? But you have dishonored 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 blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? And so this first reason actually has two sub-points, but the general point James is making is that God's way is not the world's way. And we've already seen in chapter 1 how James tells the poor to take pride or rejoice in their high position, while the rich in their humiliation. So, if God was one of the rostered welcomers today, you know, he would have ushered the poor to the best seats of honor in our church, not that we have any. In fact, this front row meant to be nobody wants to sit.

But what he would then do, of course, is to consign, let's say, if Donald Trump came, to go and sit on the floor over there. Or maybe, maybe not Donald Trump, he doesn't come here, so Anthony Albanese maybe. Now, I know some of you are probably enjoying the thought of seeing that happen, but God is not doing that because he values the rich less than the poor. Rather, he does that to teach them humility, so that they know, so that they might know where their true value lies, not in their status.

And that's what rich people tend to think, but in Christ. And so, likewise, James says here that the poor are most ready to accept God's promises, God has chosen them because they have little else

to distract them. Their faith is still a gift from God, but so is the situation that God has put them into that allows them to more easily see the riches that are found in God's kingdom rather than the things around the world. And so, if we claim to follow Jesus, our glorious Lord, and to serve him, then we have to have the same mindset and see people as the Lord sees them and treats them accordingly. Now, the second sub-point, of course, is that not only is this not the Lord's way, it's actually foolish to follow the world's way. And often we think that, you know, if we ingratiate ourselves with power, you know, they'll look after us in return. So, if you're nice to Donald Trump, he'll be nice to you, which we all know is not true, right? But you only have to look at others around as well and look at the news and see who are the ones exploiting the vulnerable workers, who are the ones suing each other in court. You know, with all that money that they already have, why are they stressing and taking people to court for that little bit more? And yet, it's the rich, isn't it, that tend to do all these things, and they're willing to destroy the lives of others to get it. And for the people in James's day, it was actually personal, because James writes, 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? Many of these Christians were persecuted, as I said in chapter 1, often by their own countrymen. They were driven out of Jerusalem because they believed in Jesus. And yet now, some of them may have found a little wealth, and they are tempted to do the same. And James is saying, why? Not only not following the Lord's way, the world's way, it's not really helping them anyway. So that's the first reason. We move on now to the second reason, where James continues to use their Jewishness to impress the truth on them. Because as

Jewish Christians, they still valued the place of the law in their lives. For them, keeping the law spoke about their standing before God, or the importance of their faith to God.

[14 : 23] And James now says that if you really want to keep the law, then showing favoritism is actually inconsistent with that. Verse 8, if you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right. Now, why is that the royal law? Well, because Jesus is their king, right? So this is the royal law, which Jesus himself said is an important commandment. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. Why? Because favoritism is to love your neighbor, not as yourself, but to love your neighbor less than yourself, isn't it? And so whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. The law, you see, is not meant to be a checklist where you kind of just tick them off one by one.

You can't say, oh, you know, I get a score out of nine, nine out of ten, because, you know, of all the ten commandments, I've kept them all except maybe committed adultery. So nine out of ten, not bad, right? A plus or whatever they call it nowadays, HD. But we can't look at it like that because he then goes on to say, he who said you shall not commit adultery also said you shall not murder. If you do not commit adultery but you do commit murder, you are or you have become a lawbreaker. And the words there, you, he who said, are important because James is saying that when you break the law, you're not just transgressing a set of rules which are abstract and impersonal. What you're doing is breaking your relationship with God as the lawgiver. Breaking any part of the law breaks our relationship with God.

And so even though they kept every aspect of the law, ten commandments, paid the tithe, given the offerings, they mustn't be so smug if they show favoritism because they've just broken the law that says love your neighbor as yourself. And of course, the Jews in Jesus' day, for example, they argued, didn't they, over who their neighbor was. And the idea was to limit, isn't it? Limit the definition of the law so that they can fulfill it easily, right? So if my neighbor is only Sharon, then I don't have to care about the rest of you, right? As long as I love Sharon, then I fulfilled the law. But Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, didn't he? And he chided the expert of the law who asked the same question. And he said, no, it's not actually who our neighbor is, but who you are as a neighbor. So for us, it's certainly not just those we get along with, right? Who we hang out with, who live in the same kind of houses as we have the same professions as us, but it's everyone who comes into contact with us, including those we naturally don't get along with or have animosity for.

And so the second reason to summarize is don't show favoritism if you wish to keep the law. If you care about pleasing God and doing what's right, love your neighbor as yourself.

[17 : 41] You know, put yourself in the shoes of that poor man with the filthy clothes. As you come into church, if you were him, what would you like have done to you?

That is what you need to do to add other people who come in as well. And don't for a moment think that this is just a minor law, because Jesus himself said in Matthew chapter 22, 37 and 39, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. That's the greatest commandment, the first. But the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself. This is the royal law that James was talking about.

So if you say you love the Lord, then you need to love your neighbor as yourself. If you love the Lord, how you love the Lord is by loving your neighbor as yourself.

And again, here's a reminder for those of us who do a lot of serving in the church. We're involved in all sorts of ways. And yet we need to be constantly checking our hearts to see actually if we're guilty of showing favoritism. You might be serving as a youth leader or Bible study leader, playing music, serving on committees, preaching even, being a pastor. But if you show favoritism, then are you just doing this for yourself? Or are you really loving the Lord with it?

You know, I would even go so far as to say there are, aren't there, a lot of people, including some of us, who do all sorts of charitable work that is literally helping the poor by, you know, getting involved with World Vision and things like that. But if you do all that, and then in your own family, or when people are not looking, or in your social circles, you show disdain for those who are weaker or poorer, then you really have to ask yourself why that's the case. Is it only when you are seen by others that you do all these things? Or are you truly doing it because you're loving your neighbor? [19:47] Well, let's get then to the last reason, because I think at the heart of all this is the issue of pride. Which is that we think we're better than the people we shun and therefore show favoritism against.

Now, we may get to the point one day that actually, you know, we're so rich and powerful that our motivation for favoritism is no longer to ingratiate ourselves with the rich to get a leg up. Instead, the mindset becomes, I'm better than you are. Or, I have God's favor because I deserve it. I mean, just look at me. I'm rich. I've got all these blessings. I'm gifted. But again, as Christians, we cannot think like that because otherwise, we have forgotten the gospel that first saved us. That's verse 12. James says, 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. If you are saved, you have received God's mercy. How else? How else have you been saved?

By your good works? By obeying the law? No. All of us rely on God's mercy just as much as the poorest person in the room.

And if you go and read King Lee's sermon, which I know you haven't yet, he told us in the passage last week that this law that gives freedom is actually the word, the gospel word that we received implanted in us to save us. And that very gospel teaches us that we are saved, aren't we, by God's grace, by his mercy, that instead of receiving the punishment, Jesus died in our place so that we can be saved instead of condemned. And this gospel, King Lee also said, is in keeping with God's own character. He's someone who is gracious and merciful. And in that Psalm 103, in just a few verses before that reading, in verse 8 to 10, it says this, The Lord is compassionate and gracious or merciful, slow to anger, abounding in love. And how does he show it? He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever. He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. It is because of his mercy that we are saved and that our sins are not counted against us. And so we need to do the same to others, showing them mercy or else. In fact, we shouldn't even be looking at other people and showing mercy in that sense, because actually, we deserve punishment as much as they do. Our good fortune has nothing to do with us, but only because of God. But I think James is saying that to the extent that you find yourself in a privileged position, then remember how God treated you and me in the first place, and do likewise to others.

Now, many of you are familiar with this verse in Micah 6.8. You know, a lot of Christian organizations use this as their motto, to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before your God. And it's a good verse, but many people focus on the first two limbs, which to say, to act justly and to love mercy. And they often then wonder, what has the third limb got to do with social justice? Well, true social justice actually requires us to be rightly related to God, that is, humbly walking before him. To realize that we have first received mercy, and therefore we need to continue to walk humbly, and then as an extension of that, to have the right motivation then to care for the poor, to show mercy, to act justly. And so James really, at the end here, gives us two ways to live there is the way of mercy, where you and your neighbor are given what they don't deserve,

and there is judgment, where we are all given exactly what we deserve. Mercy means that we're given what we're not deserving of. Judgment means that we're given exactly what we deserve. [24:13] And it is by our choice in how we treat others that God will in turn use that choice for us, right? Which is why James advocates mercy. All of us need mercy, and mercy always triumphs or trump's judgment, because God is a merciful God. We would rather his mercy than his judgment.

But if you don't show mercy, then don't be surprised that when you come face to face with God, you don't get the same mercy that you did not show to others. And so the third reason, to summarize, not to show favoritism, is that if you understand God and his gospel of grace, you will show the same mercy to others. So that's the passage. But now I want to end with some practical considerations, right? Because in your mind, some of you might be thinking, it is all well good, Mark, to be talking about no favoritism and all this, but what about this? And what about that?

So I want to deal with a few of the what abouts, okay? The first what about is that of serving and leading. If we're not to show favoritism, does it mean that anyone can lead and serve whatever the case might be, right? Otherwise, we'll be treating people differently. Well, the answer is no, because the favoritism that James was talking about here is to judge someone by the face or the outward appearance. This means treating them based on superficial reasons that have nothing to do with what they're being asked to serve in. But other times in the Bible, there are things that are being asked to be done that actually requires maturity or gifts as a criteria. And so in those instances, it is actually okay and actually important that the church needs to then discern whether someone is suited to serve or not. So it doesn't mean that anyone who puts up their hands and says, look, I want to teach the Bible, we would say, yes, go for it. We can't show favoritism. Why? Because God's truth is important, and we want to make sure that only godly and mature Christians teach and preach so as not to lead others astray. Or if you can't carry a tune, then please, by all means, sing to your heart's content in the pews, and we would love you to do that. But it is probably not the best thing then to have you serving as a song leader, right? Because it does not build up the church. That's why you don't get me or don't see me playing the drums, all right? Because that is not a good thing. It does not build up the church for me to try not to play the drums, right? So there are reasons why sometimes it's not the case that we have to treat everyone the same. Second, what about, is that of relationships and social gatherings. Just to give you a really kind of obvious example, as a husband, I need to treat my wife differently to other women in the church. I hope you can accept that. It's not favoritism, okay? And so too the care of my family members, right? So Emma and Lauren will have special care for me. Now, it's not that I don't care about the rest of you, but God has given me a specific responsibility to care for them too, right? Now that they're adults, less care, right?

But still care. And so to extend that even further, even though we're all brothers and sisters in Christ, there is nothing wrong with having some people in church that are a bit closer to you than others, okay? Some people will be your close friends and some people will not. And it doesn't mean that someone's not your close friend, they can't still be a valued brother or sister in Christ.

[28:23] Now, I'll give you an example. Our beloved Jeff, you know, he loves everyone, right? He cared for everyone. He did not discriminate. And yet at the service on Thursday, as Rob Chu came up to pray, what did we find out? That Jeff went bike riding with Rob.

And I have to say, Jeff has never gone bike riding with me. Now, was Jeff showing favoritism? No, no. And I don't take it that way as well. I love him as a brother. And maybe it was me that didn't want to go bike riding with him. I don't know.

But practically, it's just not possible when a church is this big and getting bigger, that we will be close to everyone, right? And so I know some of you, for example, you want to have a birthday party and you agonize over who should you invite. And I want to give you the freedom to know that you don't have to invite everyone in church. That's just the reality. You can't afford it anyway.

Now, the dilemma, of course, is that these invitations do, however, carry a signal of acceptance in the community. That people feel a belonging when they're invited to things.

Not that it's just in church and everybody has to be allowed to come. But no, there are special occasions that people get invited to. And so really, if you're the one doing the inviting, it is worth just checking your motivations and to make sure that they are pure or at least not compromised by judging others with evil thoughts. So I'll give you an example. If you, for example, you are in your growth group and you invite everyone in your growth group, except for one person, what's that saying? You don't have to invite everyone, I just said, but you just left out the one person. It's pretty

clear, isn't it? So really, the bottom line is, it's okay sometimes to treat people differently. Sometimes it's important to treat them as such, but it's never okay to do so if you're judging others with evil thoughts, being selfish, excluding them for reasons that really have no validity. Now, we must not be judging others, okay? So we must not go, oh, Emma too had a party, didn't invite Sharon, I wonder why. Okay, let's not go there, okay? We can't read other people's thoughts. Only the person doing it will know, and God will know. And so we are all answerable to God. We don't need to be checking up and second-guessing other people. But also, I want to encourage you that if you are a believer in Christ, then actually, don't put yourself in the poor man's shoes, even though I just said that a bit earlier, that was hypothetical. But in real life, don't have a pity me attitude or poor me attitude.

[31:27] Don't think that, oh, you know, I'm the one that's being left out, or nobody cares for me, or, you know, I'm less fortunate, I'm poorer, and therefore nobody accepts me. Why? Because at the very start, it says, you believe, and therefore, you're a child of God. You have the glorious Lord as your Savior, which means you are actually rich. So God has already shown you mercy. And so instead of coming to church and going, who else is going to show me mercy? I want to encourage you to come into church and say, look, hey, I'm a rich person, rich in God. Let me look around and see who I can show mercy to today. Who can I love? Leave the judging to God as to what other people may be doing to you.

But you need to check, as you are relating to others, that you don't end up having evil thoughts in your heart. All of us, rich or poor, if we believe in Jesus, we have been shown mercy by God in Christ. We can do the same for others. And when we do that, then we stamp out favoritism from among our congregation. Let's pray.

I thank you, Father, for your mercy, for not counting our sins against us, but instead giving us the glorious riches of the kingdom in your Son.

Father, forgive us and guard us against favoritism. Search our own hearts, search our hearts even when we don't realize it, to see if there are evil thoughts. And help us to be like your Son, full of grace and mercy. In his name we pray. Amen.