

No Favouritism

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[0 : 00] Emma, thank you. Let's keep our Bibles open there and look down at verse 1. My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism.

! This September and October at church we're reading the letter of James here in the Bible, which is a call to Christian believers to live lives of devoted obedience to our God. He is a good, perfect, heavenly Father. He's devoted to the good of those who love Him.

And He wants us to live lives of love and loyalty as we listen to His words and do as He says. I guess you know this, there is nothing half-hearted about a living relationship with our Maker. Don't come to church and sing and smile and then go home and that's it. We are meant to go all in, meant to be as devoted to Him as He is to us.

And in chapter 2 and verse 1 this morning, do you see this? One concrete command from God for us to obey, to shape our hearts and our lives as a church that we might be pleasing to Him.

[1 : 09] Do not show favouritism. My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism. OK, what is James talking about?

Favouritism is when you make judgments about people based on what you see. Maybe the colour of their skin, maybe what they're wearing, maybe their size or their accent or how rich they appear to be.

You judge people because of that and then you favour one person above another. You pick a favourite. Some obvious examples.

Imagine, awfully, a cafe with a little sign in the window that says whites only. That's a judgement based on skin colour.

And then some people receive attention and respect and welcome. You can come in and others are kept out. That is just awful. Skin colour based favouritism.

[2 : 16] And yet some of us will have suffered from that. And it is alive in our world today. Everywhere. Think, maybe less sharply, of a golf club, for example.

Our family watched Happy Gilmore recently. I don't know if you've seen that film. It's an American sports comedy. And Happy Gilmore becomes a golf player but he dresses shabbily and he speaks coarsely.

And the golf club committee look him up and down with distaste. They judge him based on his clothes, his accent, his connections.

That isn't who we want around here. Don't let him in. A kind of class judgement. Favouritism. A while back, the Cannes Film Festival in the south of France was in the news because of a high heels row.

There was a film producer who had part of her left foot amputated. And she wasn't allowed to enter the festival because she wasn't wearing high heels. She couldn't.

[3 : 25] People looked her up and down and they pointed at her flat shoes and said, No, no, this can't work. You're not allowed in. They'd made a judgement. She's not welcome.

While the people with two feet and high heels could come in. That's favouritism. When you make decisions about people, you make judgements between them based on race, class, looks, wealth and so on.

And James believes you must not do that. You mustn't do that. Well, the golf club and the film festival, that's probably quite a long way from how we feel we might be.

But look now at James' example in verses 2 to 4. This is a church example. An example of how we must not show favouritism.

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.

[4 : 23] If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, here's a good seat for you, but you 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?

This is like a church meeting, I guess. And you are meant to imagine it here in Orchard Park on a Sunday. So one newcomer walks through the door and they are well groomed and well off and look clean and smart and no doubt polite.

Good morning. And right behind him shuffles someone very obviously poor, with clothes mismatched and stained, and maybe smelling a bit and their head down slightly.

How do you respond to each of them? In exactly the same way? I don't think we've got any good seats to offer people here, particularly they're all blue and plastic and hard, there are no thrones, and some people have to get their own chairs out.

But you see what the example is getting at, right? If you show special attention to someone in church, the person wearing fine clothes, here you are, here's a good seat for you.

[5 : 37] If for some reason you give him a touch more attention and welcome, James says, have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

I suspect for some of us, if you are like me, showing favouritism might be a bit more subtle than you sit here and you stand there. Lots of us are at it, do you not think?

You meet someone for the first time, either at church or elsewhere, at school, maybe a new boy in your class, or at work or at church, and very quickly, do you not do this?

You check out their hair, their clothes, their looks, their accent, their job, and you weigh them up, and you make a judgement. Shall I come closer?

Be more welcoming? Or am I going to take a step back and not really look at them? I'm not interested. What are we doing in that first moment with people? We're working out whether to favour them.

[6 : 42] Or not. That's not just me who does that, right? You need to reassure me about this. Favouritism works itself out in the welcoming life of a church.

At coffee time, at the end, when you weigh up who to speak to, and you move towards the person you've judged as easier and nicer and more likely.

You will notice it in who you invite round to your house. You will see it if you're extra enthusiastic about someone joining the church. She seems so nice and gifted, so brilliant to have her, and you kind of forget about the ordinary person who's just come.

It is possible, as you look around a church or any group of people, to have a little ranking system in your head. Wonderful, nice, good, trouble-free people, easy to talk to.

I favour them more dull people, more hard work, not my type. I slightly avoid them. And so you favour these people.

[7 : 51] And the thing going on slightly deeper inside us when we show favouritism is rather than simply loving the human being in front of me as a creature made in God's image, instead I weigh them up to see if they are useful to me.

To see what I can get from them. I think that's partly what drives verses 2 to 4 and this example of rich and poor. The man with fine clothes who walks in.

Oh, he could be wonderful for us. His status and his cash. Welcome. The poor man in filthy clothes. What use will he be? Sit down.

This happens in cultures around the world. Systems of ranking of people. And it happens in churches too.

Because as many of us will know, there are churches and there are Christian networks where the poor are nowhere to be seen because they know that they are not really welcome.

[8 : 53] Come back to the passage here. If any of this sticks for us, I mean I think in part we are a welcoming church.

This is not an enormous criticism of us in these verses, but some of this will stick for us. And if we know something of the danger in our own lives of passing judgment on people and showing favoritism, how serious is it?

Well, James' first reaction comment in verse 4 should make us feel really quite uneasy. Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

See, when we make decisions about people, yes to him, no to her, we are being judges. And the problem with that is that there's already a judge.

There's a judge of all the earth who sees into our hearts. What do I think I'm up to when I weigh up people and pass judgment on them?

[9 : 59] It's as though as I'm having my own little stab at being God, except verse 4, I'm a judge with evil thoughts. See, when you arrive somewhere new, when you arrive at theological college and you look people up and down and decide who will be your friends, I mean, that's a...

Don't think it has nothing to do with God. It has everything to do with him. And that's what the rest of these verses say. So in our second half, just follow through with me what James says in these passages here.

When you show favoritism, were we to do that, verses 5 to 7, you actually dishonor God's chosen ones. 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?

You have dishonored the poor. Like, that is a problem. When we look down our noses and judge the poor in the eyes of the world, we're actually out of line with God.

Because it says here he has specially selected the poor to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom. All the way through the Bible, God has a heart for the poor and the poor in spirit.

[11 : 20] Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God. It seems that God loves especially to shower his grace and kindness on people whom the world has discarded.

People who know they have got so little to give. And so imagine someone who is very obviously poor and in need walking through the doors here. And if you can picture this, at the very same time as the Lord God is overjoyed to set his love on them, we say, you go and stand over there.

For people in James' day, this dishonoring of the poor is even more warped, actually, because the rich who the church is so keen to welcome are exploiting them and dragging them into court and blaspheming God himself.

And when we show favoritism between people, we can dishonor God's chosen ones. More than that, verses 8 to 11, you break God's law. As I looked at this this week, I think this, in these verses here, this is where my casual judging of other people, my selecting of who I'll favor, is really shown up in its true colors.

Look at verse 8. If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right. The royal law is the law of King Jesus, our King, who in the Sermon on the Mount takes the Old Testament law of Moses and fulfills it and extends it, and the sum total of God's beautiful, life-giving law is love your neighbor as yourself.

[13 : 08] There's no greater command. This is the heart of the life God loves. This is why God's law isn't a burden.

This is why our society is lost and adrift without God's law and without Jesus. Living this way, loving your neighbor as yourself, not only pleases him, it changes societies and communities and we do well.

Verse 9, but if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. So as I look you up and down, not you, but as I look someone up and down and I judge them and then I avoid them and I favor someone else, I violate the law of love.

I'm a lawbreaker. Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking it all. Really? Yes.

4, verse 11, he who said you shall not commit adultery also said you shall not murder. If you don't commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become become a lawbreaker and if we will not love one another without showing favoritism, we have defied our God.

[14 : 39] These verses really bring me up short. I'll tell you why. When I became a Christian 30 years ago, I was 18, a few things changed in my life straight away.

I used to swear all the time and I stopped swearing all the time pretty much overnight. It was just wonderful and people noticed. I didn't stop drinking beer but God helped me to stop getting drunk every Friday night.

It was wonderful. There were a few changes quite quickly in my life as I did what God said and God worked in me. And I think the danger is that now, 30 years later, I can kind of cruise along go K as a Christian because I'm quite polite and I say my prayers and I teach people about Jesus and I don't swear very often, although sometimes I do, my family will say.

And yet I am in danger of judging people very quickly and very instantly. And I do show favoritism. I am so tempted to surround myself with people who are like me and people who will like me and people who won't suck my energy.

And James 2 opened me up and says, Chris, you are a lawbreaker. James 2. James writes to dear brothers and sisters.

[16:08] He's writing to people who belong to Jesus. He says, you're dear to me. Don't show favoritism. Do you? If you do, you dishonor God's chosen ones, you break God's law and finally in these verses you invite God's merciless judgment.

Look, verse 12. 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.

So it says here, on the final day of judgment when you and I stand before the living God we will be judged by the law that gives freedom.

The royal freeing law of King Jesus who says, love your neighbour as yourself. And if on that day it has been revealed that I have spent my days dishonouring the poor, discriminating and judging and showing favouritism with little mercy or love shown to others even though I call myself a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It says here, judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. That's a kind of gulp verse I think.

[17:29] It's a warning. Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. So we're talking here this morning about favouritism.

When you make judgments between people based on what you see and then you favour one person above another. Can you be like that?

In your class at school? At your new college? As you go away to uni? In our church? I like the look of that person.

Welcome. Come into my life and my church. She is awkward. She is not my type. I will push her to one side. And we should hear this warning of judgment without mercy from the God who sees into our hearts and it should shake us a bit actually.

And it should make us say I don't want that. I don't want that. So what must we do today if we want judgment with mercy?

[18:40] What must we do today as a church as individuals if conscious that we break God's law we need mercy and we want to change? What must we do if we want our hearts and our church to please God?

If we want to be more and more a community in which we don't judge by appearances and we show no favouritism and all are welcomed and none are left out and no one is looked down on.

The kind of place where we show the kind of acceptance and love and mercy towards others that in the words of the end of verse 13 triumphs over judgment. What must we do? We must turn together once more to the one whom verse 1 back over the page calls our glorious Jesus Christ.

Because do you know this? The stunning thing is that he, this glorious Jesus, seeing us as poor and filthy law-breaking sinners, he doesn't turn us away.

But instead in his glory he makes himself poor for us. he died on the cross to pay for our evil thoughts and our discriminating deeds.

[20:05] And from the cross, that place of glorious mercy, a rich and deep river of mercy and forgiveness flows to convicted sinners like us who are so undeserving of God's favour.

God is the gospel, the good news, that God does not look us up and down and work out if we're useful to him and then either welcome us or push us aside.

He looks on the heart, knows exactly what you're like, and yet he sends his son to die to offer you salvation. None of us deserves favour.

all of us are poor. We are simply poor sinners who as we turn to God in broken hearted repentance and faith, we receive undeserved mercy.

That's who we are. Richer or poorer, whatever our skin colour or background or accent, God doesn't show favouritism, but he bathes us in full and free mercy.

[21:18] Isn't that wonderful? So would you come to him this morning? Lord God, your word cuts me open.

How vile that I would judge between people and dishonour you and break your law. I'm so sorry. I repent of my sins for the sake of your son Jesus Christ.

Show mercy to me and help me by your spirit to speak and act according to your good law. Make us as a church more like your son, we pray.

Come to God together for mercy and grace. love. And then having done that, will we spend our coffee time and our lunch time and our weeks and our lives without showing favouritism?

Will we go from here into our week and stop judging, stop looking down, but instead fuelled by God's love and mercy towards us? Will we commit together to living lives of deep, real, neighbour love as we put the beautiful royal law of God into practice?

[22 : 39] James 2, 1-13. Let me lead us in a prayer. We're going to pray and then we're going to sing together. Do not show favouritism as believers in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

Almighty God, how wrong and how vile that we should look others up and down and judge whether we will accept or like them or not.

How awful to act as judges ourselves. How terrible to break your royal law and to not show love to our fellow neighbours.

We are so thankful for your word which cuts us open. We're so thankful for your son who made himself poor for us that we might receive mercy and grace to change us into his likeness.

We pray that you would work in us. Please make us more and more a church that does not look on the outward appearance. May we be such a distinctive community here in Orchard Park and here in Cambridge that others would come in and look and see something wonderful your royal law put into practice.

[24 : 09] As we don't show favour but accept all. We ask for your help and we ask that through the mercies of Jesus Christ in whose name we pray.

Amen.