

Faith & Favoritism

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[0:00] Well, good morning, church. Wherever you may be, we invite you to turn in the Bible to James chapter 2. James chapter 2, verses 1 through 13.

Let me read these verses for us this morning. My brothers and sisters, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, you sit here in a good place, while you say to the poor man, you stand over there, or sit down at my feet.

Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?

But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

[1:25] If you really fulfill the royal law, according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For he who said do not commit adultery also said do not murder.

If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. Let's pray. Father, we pray that you would speak to us through these words that you inspired James to write so long ago through your spirit.

Help me as I proclaim your word. Help each of us in our different locations as we listen and take to heart what you have to say for us today.

[2:31] May you be glorified. May your spirit do his work. In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, one of the things my family and I have enjoyed doing together recently is cooking.

We've tried some new recipes over the last several weeks and the results have generally been quite satisfying. On Mother's Day, which happened to be our wedding anniversary, our older children, Nathan and Grace, wanted to make breakfast for us on their own.

Without us present in the kitchen at all. We were a bit nervous at first, but they did a great job. Now, when we're all cooking together, our two-year-old, Hannah, likes to mix the pancake batter or the scrambled eggs or whatever is in the bowl on the counter.

She can be quite engaged, but like any other two-year-old, she also needs to be carefully watched. So that she doesn't take some chili powder and add it to the pancake batter or dump the coffee grounds into the scrambled eggs.

Right? In order to be successful in cooking, you need to have good ingredients in good proportions and you need to carefully avoid and resist anything that would spoil or contaminate the batter.

[3:37] Now, in the same way, to be healthy and growing as Christians, we need to mix together healthy proportions of God's word and prayer, of solitude and fellowship, of humble confession and thankful praise.

Those kinds of things will make for good spiritual nourishment. But in the passage we just read, James is concerned that his people have added something bad to the mix.

Added something that will spoil their spiritual nourishment. Don't combine faith with favoritism, he says.

The ESV translates it partiality. So this morning, I want us to look at our passage in three parts. First, what is favoritism? Or partiality in verses 1 to 4.

Second, why favoritism can't be combined with faith in Jesus Christ, verses 5 to 11. And third, the Christian alternative to favoritism.

[4:41] So first, what exactly is favoritism? Literally, verse 1 can be translated, Do not in favoritisms. The word is actually plural, indicating that there are many different expressions or ways of showing, favoritism, do not in favoritisms hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

But then James goes on to give one very specific and colorful illustration of favoritism in verses 2 and 3. A man wearing a gold ring, literally gold fingers, with bright, clean, fine clothing, walks into church, and a poor person in shabby, smelly, filthy clothing also comes in.

And the usher at the door, or whoever might be greeting them, immediately pays special attention to the well-dressed, wealthy man, and makes sure that he has a good, comfortable, honorable seat, but rudely tells the second guy to stand in the corner or sit on the floor.

Now, we don't know whether this exact scenario had actually happened in a first-century Christian meeting, and James had heard about it, and he was addressing it. But it is evident that James was not just giving a hypothetical example here.

He was concerned about a real and serious pattern of favoritism that was manifesting itself in one way or another within the Christian community. Verse 6, he says, You have dishonored the poor man.

[6:08] And for James, this was a very serious concern. In verse 4, he says, You've made distinctions among yourselves. Now, that could also be translated, You have wavered within yourselves, or you have become inconsistent within yourselves.

It's the same verb that appeared in chapter 1, verse 6, and is translated there, doubt. And as we talked about back then, that it has this idea of being double-minded, being driven and tossed by the winds.

And as we said earlier, a double-minded person is not just somebody who has unanswered questions or troubled emotions. A double-minded person has divided loyalties.

A double-minded person is not steadfast in their love for God. James is calling us in his epistle here to steadfast love for the Lord who steadfastly loves his people.

And so James says, I mean, if we think about it, what would motivate people, what would motivate us to pay special attention to the rich and overlook or dishonor the poor?

[7:23] Well, I mean, think about it. If you know or if you see somebody who seems wealthy, powerful, popular, athletic, beautiful, smart, suave, you might think, I want to connect with that person.

I want to become part of that person's social network. They could benefit me. Or you might be intimidated by them. You might think, well, I better make sure to stay on their good side because I don't want to get on their bad side.

On the other hand, if you see somebody and in your assessment, they seem poor, powerless, unpopular, ugly, smelly, awkward, you might tend to avoid them and look the other way.

You might think, maybe that person doesn't have much to offer me except for their problems. I'd rather avoid them. And you know, often this happens very often and often it happens almost subconsciously we don't even realize what's going on.

We don't even sort of express those thoughts in our own head. We just instinctively turn away or instinctively fix our attention. Of course, this can happen in person.

[8 : 34] This can happen on social media. This can happen in all kinds of contexts. And James says this is a very serious issue. He says you've become judges with evil thoughts. In other words, you've been thinking and reasoning and coming to conclusions that are inconsistent with your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

You're not seeing people the way God sees them. You're not treating people the way God treats them. You're making judgments according to worldly or selfish standards that don't match up with God's.

Now, according to the Bible, there are appropriate and godly reasons to honor certain people in distinctive ways. For example, husbands and wives are commanded to show special honor to one another and to give special priority to pursuing and maintaining and growing in their marriage covenant.

And sometimes that might mean drawing back for a time or saying no to some other opportunities or limiting some other relationships. Children are commanded, honor and obey your parents.

Right? It's appropriate for children to pay more attention to their parents than to anyone else in the world. And it's right for adult children to continue honoring their parents by, among other things, seeing that they're cared for in their old age, according to their needs, even if in some cases that calls for sacrifices.

[10 : 01] God's people, as God's people were instructed to honor the governmental authorities as they carry out their God-ordained role in the world, as well as honor church elders who lead and teach God's people faithfully. We should also honor elderly members of the church in particular ways.

1 Timothy 5, 1 and 2 says, don't rebuke an older man, but encourage him as you would a father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.

Right? In the family of God, we honor one another in distinctive ways. Paul indicates that we rightly honor men and women in the church not by pretending that we are all identical in every way, but by appropriately recognizing and honoring one another's distinctive gifts and contributions.

So the Bible isn't saying that we should never honor anyone in any distinctive ways. I mean, for one example, if an elderly person with a cane walks into the room, you better make sure they have the best seat and ask somebody else to move or you move if you need to.

Right? What the Bible is, what James is warning us against is favoritism. And we might define that as honoring some people and dishonoring others for ungodly and self-serving reasons.

[11:21] And in this passage, James is particularly concerned about favoritism that dishonors the poor and vulnerable. Now, of course, it is possible to do the opposite, to dishonor the rich and unjustly favor the poor.

Leviticus 19.15, which we had read out earlier for us, says, You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness you shall judge your neighbor. Right?

There's equal justice before the law back in Leviticus. And so it's possible to express resentment toward everyone who is wealthy or more privileged than we in some way or other.

That's not a godly thing. It's possible to dismiss the perspective of anyone who hasn't had the same troubles as we might have. And those are attitudes to resist.

But James' primary concern was not that people would unjustly favor the poor and dishonor the rich. Right? In most times and most places, the far more prevalent temptation is to favor the rich and dishonor the poor.

[12:29] To favor those who are privileged or have all kinds of benefits in many ways and to dishonor people who are poor or more vulnerable. And that's why over and over the Bible specifically commands God's people along with specifically saying that husbands and wives should honor each other, children should honor their parents, we should honor governmental authorities and church leaders.

The Bible specifically commands us to honor the poor and vulnerable and show particular care and concern for their well-being.

Just a few examples. Deuteronomy 10, 17-19 For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who is not partial and takes no bribe.

God executes justice for the fatherless and the widow and loves the sojourner giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner therefore for you are sojourners in the land of Egypt.

Or Proverbs 14, 31 Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their maker but whoever is kind to the needy honors God. Or consider Jesus' own words.

[13:43] When you give a banquet Jesus says invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed. There's not a corresponding verse where Jesus says when you give a party make sure to invite people who are healthy and wealthy and wise.

Right? He knows we'll do that already. No, he says make sure to include and invite and celebrate. Right? Not just sort of give aid but to celebrate with people who are poor and vulnerable.

Now why does God specifically remind us to do this because these are the people who are most in danger of being dishonored and mistreated and overlooked in this world.

And God wants us his people to express his particular care for the poor and vulnerable so that they know that God has not forgotten them.

Now in our church I can think of several examples of people who are actively showing care and concern and honor for one another and looking out for each other in the ways that we might be vulnerable.

[14:54] Just this past week someone who was homeless not too long ago said to me I'm thankful that our church really cares and reaches out. Brothers and sisters let's continue doing that. Let's not become weary in doing good.

Now before we go on to the next point I also want to say that in this passage about favoritism we see that James is speaking to the same issues in the first century on perhaps a smaller scale that our nation has been dealing with and that have erupted this week on a large scale.

Many people feel that they have been dishonored overlooked mistreated and far worse for a long time. George Floyd was only the most recent example.

Favoritism has a long history in the United States and many twisted effects and it's not just a black and white issue even though that's perhaps the relationship that goes back farthest in history.

It's right to lament and to listen and to pray and to seek justice. How can we as the church be a redemptive presence in these troubled times?

[16 : 16] As we've said earlier we should certainly pray for peace and lament the destruction and violence that has erupted in many cities. We should pray for those in authority and honor the authorities God has established.

Pray for the law enforcement officers who face a hard task on a daily basis. But you know if speaking to some of us like me some of us might just want to duck put our heads down and sort of wish this never happened and avoid talking about it because it's uncomfortable to talk about race and it raises all kinds of difficult emotions and tough questions.

But the question James raises here is how do we honor one another? And how do we look out how do we listen to one another?

Listen to those who might particularly be mourning or lamenting. James calls us here to examine our own hearts.

And to take active steps by the power of the Holy Spirit to love our neighbors as ourselves and to seek to be a redemptive and justice seeking and healing presence in this world by the power of the Holy Spirit.

[17 : 48] Let's pray that we might be able to move in that direction by God's grace. So that's what favoritism is. Honoring some people and dishonoring others for ungodly and selfish reasons.

And James is concerned about that. Right? Not just when it erupts into a national crisis but just when it happens on a day-to-day basis and when it manifests the self-serving attitudes of our own hearts.

So first, that's what favoritism is. Second, James shows us why faith in Christ and favoritism can't be combined.

Verses 5 through 11, James gives us three reasons why we as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ must resist and avoid favoritism. Verse 5, he says, favoritism is contrary to the character of God.

Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him? Now, just to be clear, James does not say here that God has chosen all poor people or only poor people to be part of his kingdom.

[18 : 58] At the end of chapter 2, James refers to Abraham who was quite wealthy and powerful as well as Rahab who seems to have been poor and relatively poor and powerless and both of them are examples of genuine faith.

But James was acknowledging the fact, the undisputed fact, that the vast majority of the early Christians were relatively poor. I mean, the vast majority of people in society back then were poor and that was true in the church as well.

Some well-educated pagans mocked the early Christians for this very reason. They said, how could Christianity be the true religion if it appeals to so many people who lack formal education like slaves and women and children?

But James wasn't ashamed of that fact. James says, God himself has delighted to bestow spiritual riches and everlasting honor upon people who the world despises and dishonors upon everyone who loves the Lord.

And the apostle Paul said the same sort of thing in 1 Corinthians 1. He says, not many of you, remember he says, not many of you are wise according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth.

[20:15] But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are.

So that no human being might boast in the presence of God. You see, all the qualities that might attract us, that we might be tempted to pay attention to people for the wrong reasons, being wealthy, being powerful, being popular, being athletic, being beautiful, being smart, being suave, none of those qualities will get anybody any closer to entering the kingdom of God.

The only way to get in is to humble ourselves and to recognize our spiritual poverty, our desperate need for God and his mercy. That's why Jesus' Beatitudes begin with the word, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

James says, if God delights to honor the poor, so should we. So, favoritism is contrary to the character of God. That's the first reason why faith and favoritism can't be mixed together or combined.

In verses 6 to 7, he gives us a second reason. He says, favoritism is practically foolish. James is speaking to his people. He says, think about the people who are causing you trouble, dragging you into court, persecuting you for being Christians.

[21:44] It's not the poor who are causing you trouble. By and large, it's the rich. Now, once again, James is not saying that all rich people are evil, he's painting with broad brush strokes. But he's saying, think, why are you paying special attention and giving special honors to people who are treating you so badly?

They are not on your side. You won't be able to satisfy them no matter how nice of a seat you give them. God. Now, we should not mistreat our enemies.

Jesus taught us to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to pray for those who persecute us, and to persevere in doing those things. You know, it's possible to become excessively focused on trying to please hostile or unreasonably demanding people who may never like us, respect us, or appreciate us in the end.

And the problem with that is in the process of trying to please other people who we're really being intimidated by, we're not actually doing it out of love, we're doing it primarily out of intimidation, we neglect other people who won't demand our attention, but who would greatly benefit from it.

So James warns us that favoritism is practically foolish. It's contrary to the character of God, it's practically foolish, and third, it's a violation of God's law.

[23:10] Verses 8 to 11, Jesus taught us that at the heart of God's law is his command to love. First, to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

James referred to that command already in verse 5 and in chapter 1 verse 12, but here he quotes the second part of that command, love your neighbor as yourself.

love. And he says favoritism transgresses that very command to love that is at the heart of God's law. And it's not just a minor issue that can be simply overlooked.

Verse 10, James says, God's moral law is not just a bunch of separate and disconnected commands that we can pick and choose which ones we like. God's moral law is a unified whole because it's an expression of God's own steadfast and undivided character.

It's like a pane of glass. If you break one part of it, you've broken it. You've broken the whole thing. One commentator said, we cannot excuse the sin of favoritism by pointing to the rest of the good that we do because sin is not simply balanced against good.

[24:26] It must be confessed and forgiven. So favoritism is contrary to God's character. It's practically foolish and it violates God's law. That's why James says it must not be combined with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we've seen what favoritism is, why it can't and must not be combined with faith in the Lord Jesus, but what is the alternative? Verses 12 James concludes by pointing us to the Christian alternative.

Now I think that many of us might expect James to say something like instead of showing favoritism show fairness by treating everyone equally.

Now fairness and equality are good ideals to pursue. The Apostle Paul 2 Corinthians 8, 13, and 14 appealed to this very principle of fairness.

He says as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need so that their abundance may in turn supply your need that there may be fairness.

[25:32] So fairness and equality is a good ideal to pursue but it actually doesn't go deep enough all by itself. The principle of fairness is right and helpful but in this fallen and complicated world it's not always clear how to apply that.

And so James appeals to an even more deeply Christian principle that's at the heart of the gospel. Mercy. Instead of simply calling us to show fairness instead of showing partiality James calls us to show mercy as God has shown mercy to us.

Now verses 12 and 13 are a bit cryptic they're short and pithy but there are a couple of key phrases that can help us understand his point especially the phrase the law of liberty in verse 12.

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. What law is James referring to there you might ask? Now notice in verses 9 through 11 James referred to the law.

Plain and simple. And in that context he's quoting from the Old Testament referring to the moral law of God recorded in the Old Testament. And he says there if we transgress even one command we've violated the whole thing.

[26:53] And so the Old Testament law by itself convicts us of sin but all by itself it does not liberate us from sin. But then in verse 12 he says so speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

It could even be translated the liberating law. You see the law of liberty seems to be something different or at least something additional to the Old Testament law. It's not just the Old Testament law.

And if we look back at chapter 1 verse 25 where James already used this phrase he uses the phrase the perfect or completed or fulfilled law the law of liberty.

What is this perfect completed law the liberating law? Well it's what James has already talked about as the word of truth. The implanted word of God that is able to save our souls.

The law of God that has been fulfilled by and in the person of Jesus Christ the glorious Lord. the law of God that's now written on our hearts under the new covenant under which God has promised to forgive our sins and remember our wickedness no more.

[28:17] You see when James talks about the law of liberty the liberating law he's talking about what Christ has accomplished to liberate us and to write and not to liberate us so we can do whatever we want by being selfish but no to liberate us so that God's law would be written on our hearts and by the power of the Holy Spirit we'd be empowered to carry to love and to show mercy as God has shown mercy to us you see in Jesus Christ we receive mercy that triumphs over judgment what does the cross mean why did Jesus die on the cross so that he would take the judgment that we deserve for our sins and pour out upon us mercy peace and forgiveness and James calls us to delight in extending that same triumphant mercy to others even in sacrificial ways but to extend that same mercy that we ourselves have received from God in

Christ now there is a strong warning in verse 13 verse the first half of the verse if we're merciless toward others if we show no mercy toward others we can't expect to receive mercy from God in the end because that's a sign that we haven't truly received mercy from God but James points us here to the liberating work of Jesus Christ he has liberated us from sin from bondage to sin our judge is now our savior we've been brought into the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ that's what he says in verse one of this chapter as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ the Lord of glory so instead of looking at others and thinking what can I hope to get from them or what do I have to fear from them we can look at them and think how does God see this person how can I extend the mercy of

God that God has shown to me to my brother or sister in Christ to my neighbor brothers and sisters instead of showing favoritism let us show mercy because God has shown us mercy in his son Jesus Christ let us pray father God we thank you for the mercy that you have shown us in Jesus Christ that triumphed over judgment that saved us from the rightful judgment we deserve oh God would you cleanse our hearts from favoritism from partiality that infects our hearts and manifests in our lives would you most of all fix our eyes on you you Lord would you be our vision the

Lord of our heart as we fix our eyes on you as we grow in our love for you may we be empowered to love our neighbors as ourselves to love one another as you have loved us Lord as we do this may we be an aroma of Christ in this world Lord the fragrance of mercy righteousness and peace that come from you pray these things in Jesus name amen