

Favouritism

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[0 : 00] Well, as part of my training for ministry, I've had various placements in different churches, both in Aberdeen and in Edinburgh and in Glasgow.

And I happened to be part of one church in Edinburgh during its centenary year. And so all sorts of special events were arranged by the church for the centenary to celebrate it.

And the main one was a Sunday service closest to the date when the church opened 100 years ago. And at this special service, the moderator of the Church of Scotland was invited to come and to preach.

And so it was a big deal for the congregation. And a lot of time had been spent in planning for this occasion. And when the day came, the moderator appeared and he was treated like royalty. So he came in with his big, long, flowing moderatorial gown. It had a kind of puffy, silky kind of neck thing going on.

[0 : 58] It was big, big, wide. And he had the moderatorial ring on his finger, a big silver ring on, I don't know which finger it was on, but it was on his hand anyway, and it was bright and it was shiny.

And when he came, he was given this very special welcome at the door. And he was led to sit down at a really nice, special, comfortable seat at the front. But on the same day, the centenary service, another man came into the church, but he didn't come through the front door like the moderator.

He came in through the side door. He was an older man. His hair was messy and his clothes were dirty. And if you got too close to him, then there was an unpleasant smell about him as well.

And so he came in and nobody welcomed him. He was left to find his own seat and he sat all by himself. No fuss was made over him. In fact, no one even spoke to him.

And so he walked out at the end of the worship service and he was quickly forgotten about. And yet in the church for months to come, there was a huge buzz still about how good it was to have the moderator of the Church of Scotland come and preach in this church.

[2 : 14] Well, you'd be glad to know that only half of that story is true and the other half is made up. The moderator part coming to the church, that's true. But the man coming, the old man, dirty clothes, smelled a bit.

That wasn't true. At least I hope it wasn't true. And yet this is the kind of disturbing scenario that James gives to us in our reading in James chapter 2. Because sadly, it is the kind of thing that does tend to happen in churches where some people are more welcome than others.

And is it right? Well, of course it isn't right. And that's why James strongly condemns this kind of favoritism. Because we should never discriminate between people.

And we know this. Of course we know. We know this in theory. But James isn't just talking about something in theory. He is talking about the way that we relate to one another.

He's talking about what we do and what we do in church. Because showing favoritism, James says, is a problem. It doesn't just damage our relationships with other people.

[3 : 26] What he's saying here is it actually damages our relationship with God too. And that really is the challenge of this passage. And so this is a striking example of failing to do God's word.

Remember, Ciri's title is Faith That Works. Because James wants his readers to have a faith that is seen by what they do. And how they work it out in their lives and in their churches.

And so when it comes to how we treat people, what we discover here is that James gives us a radical message. A radical way of being that is a challenge for us all.

So I'd like us to look at three points this afternoon. The first is what's the problem? Favoritism. The second, why it matters. Sin. And the third, how to prevent it.

We need to grasp the gospel of Jesus Christ. So what's the problem? Why it matters. And how to prevent it. So first of all, what is the problem? The problem is favoritism. And James highlights this

straight away in a reading.

[4 : 27] He says, my brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. Now the word translated favoritism that James uses here is a Greek word that literally means receiving the face.

Receiving the face. And it's from a Hebrew word for partiality. So in other words, what he's talking about is showing partiality by judging people according to what they look like.

About receiving people based on mere outward appearance. And we can relate to what James is saying because we have all done this. In fact, if we're honest, this is how we normally judge people. We judge people by what we see. By their outward appearance. By what they look like. And that's why James gives this shocking example. So let me read it again. 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. 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, you stand there or sit on the floor by my feet.

[5 : 39] Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Now in those days, I think the gap between the rich and poor was more obvious.

It could be seen in the way that they dressed and how they conducted themselves in society. And so James is talking about whether an example or whether an actual event.

He's talking about a rich man entering into the Christian meeting, the gathering place. And it's obvious he's rich because of his outward appearance. There's the gold ring and the fine clothes.

Perhaps he pulled up in his nice camel, the Aston Martin camel version, outside the gathering place. And he had all the bling shining in the sunlight, his massive ring on his finger.

Perhaps he was wearing the latest designer gear from the Jerusalem Fashion Week. And that's the rich man. Clearly he's rich. Clearly he's wealthy. And then the poor man comes in.

[6 : 39] And it's obvious that he's poor because of what he has got on. He was wearing filthy old clothes. Didn't look great. Didn't smell great. Didn't have a fancy leather man bag like the rich man.

He just had a Tesco poly bag on his hand. And it sounds like both of these men were visitors to the gathering. And so the welcome team greet the rich man.

He comes in. They shake his hand. They sit him down on a good seat. But the warm welcome didn't extend to the poor man. In fact, he didn't even get a seat. He was made to stand out of the way or to sit on the floor, which was the place of a servant.

So the rich man gets the preferential treatment. And what James is doing is highlighting the discrimination of partiality by those welcoming someone by making a distinction based on what they look like.

And James is not saying, you know, you should really try and avoid this if you possibly can. No. What he says is you become judges with evil thoughts.

[7 : 47] And so our outward treatment of people, what he's saying is it actually exposes an inner problem. And that's why James wants us to realize that we can't discriminate against people because of the outward appearance, because of external factors.

Maybe what people wear, where they live, what kind of house they live in, what they do, what they drive, where they studied, what school their children go to, and so on and so on.

Because these are all ways in which we so easily can discriminate against people, whether based on their looks or their race or their color. But the point James is making is that we must not show any kind of partiality, any kind of favoritism, any kind of discrimination, because he says it's evil.

It comes from your evil thoughts, which means we can't judge somebody as special or significant or useful or worthy of our time and judge somebody else as less significant, less useful, and therefore not so worthy of our time.

And so this is a clear challenge to the church back then, but I sense it's still a challenge for the church today, isn't it? And so how do we apply what James is saying here?

[9 : 07] Well, it means that we won't discriminate between different people when they come into church. We will give a warm welcome to all visitors. We'll give our time and attention to everyone, to anyone, and we won't avoid anyone.

And it's going to happen, isn't it, from the moment we walk in the door through to who we choose to sit beside. Through to who we gravitate towards over coffee.

Or maybe just to give another example, who do we invite into our home for a meal? I wonder if we are willing to have anyone come and sit around our dinner table.

Or do we only invite certain people? Do we differentiate between the successful and the struggling, or between the socially engaging and the socially awkward?

Because what James is doing here is he is probing to see if favoritism is a problem for us, and a problem for our church.

[10:11] Because we do need to be careful that we don't treat other people as more important, more significant than others. And we need to be wary that we don't create some kind of culture within our church that tolerates this kind of treatment of people.

And so James is saying favoritism is a serious problem. And so he tells us why next. And so our first point, what's the problem? Favoritism. The second point, why?

It matters. It matters because it's a sin. And we see this in verse 5 to 13. James makes it so clear that favoritism is sinful. Look at verse 9.

He says, if you show favoritism, you sin. And so he explains why this matters by giving three reasons. And so reason one in verse 5 is you misunderstand God.

Verse 5 says, 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?

[11:18] He's saying God has chosen people who are poor to be rich in faith and heirs of his kingdom. So it's clear God doesn't favor the rich.

So the rich don't have greater status in God's kingdom. And James' reader should have been aware of this because in the early church, so many people were poor.

Poor people, but people who were chosen by God to be his people. And so if God chooses poor people to inherit the kingdom, then that is the greatest honor of all honors, to belong to God's kingdom.

Then James is saying, well, no one should dare strip those who seem insignificant in the eyes of this world who are poor. No one should strip them of the honor that God has given to them.

And so he's saying we misunderstand God if we think God chooses people on the basis of what they have or what they have done or what they can offer.

[12:23] Of course, James isn't saying that God only chooses the poor, but that the poor are an example. Or they're like a model of what it means to belong to God.

Because if you're poor, you have nothing. You have nothing to offer. And yet, the lack of status, the lack of security means that you must completely depend on God in faith.

And so this is why it's wrong to show favoritism, isn't it? It's because when it comes to God, nobody is better than anybody else. We all need to depend upon God's grace to inherit God's kingdom.

And that's how God works. And that's what James wants his readers to grasp. And that's why we must never judge people by our worldly standards. We must never think that person is more deserving or more worthy of a place in God's kingdom than that person.

And so showing any favoritism essentially proves that we misunderstand God and we misunderstand his gospel of grace, of how God works and how God brings people to himself.

[13:37] And so that's the first reason you misunderstand God. The second reason is you misunderstand people. That's what James is saying in verse 6 and 7. He's highlighting the absurdity of favoring the rich.

And so listen to the three questions that he asks in verse 6 and 7. 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? So he's expecting the answer to be yes. Yes, it is the rich who are exploiting you.

Yes, it is the rich who are dragging you into court. And yes, it is the rich who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong. So James is saying the rich have got the power.

They've got the influence. And guess what? They are using it against you. Can't you see this? And so James implies that favoring the rich is never going to be to the advantage of his readers.

[14:38] So he's saying don't try and accommodate them by neglecting other people. Because if they exploit you, he's saying, and if they slander your Lord, Jesus Christ, then trying to curry favor with them is actually ridiculous.

It shows you misunderstand people and what people are really like. And yet this kind of attitude is sadly still around in our church today.

It's alive and well because we tend to crave the honor of the world. If we belong to the church, we want the world to think we're hip, cool, relevant. We want the world to love us, to honor us.

But James is saying the world doesn't actually care about the church. He's telling his readers, you should know this. Yeah, of course the world will want the church when it needs a bit of religion, like somebody to get married or somebody to be buried in a funeral.

Yeah, religion is good then. For James is making the point, it is the rich who oppress you. It's the rich who oppress you and who oppose God.

[15 : 49] It's the social and political elites. It's the powerful and it's the influential. So they're the ones, he's saying, who blaspheme the noble name of our Lord Jesus, the one to whom you belong.

And so we should never think today that bending over backwards to show favor to the rich, to the elite, will actually achieve anything. James says it won't.

So he says you misunderstand God, you misunderstand people, and the third reason he gives is you break God's law. Verse 8 to 11. So verse 8 says, if you really keep the royal law found in scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you're doing right.

So we might think, well, what's the royal law that James speaks of? Well, he's clearly referring to God's law because he quotes from Leviticus chapter 19, where it says, love your neighbor as yourself.

But it's not just the Old Testament law he's talking about, because when Jesus is asked, which is the greatest commandment in the law, remember what Jesus said, love the Lord your God.

[16 : 54] But then the second half of what he said was, love your neighbor as yourself. That's the greatest commandment. And so the royal law is the Old Testament law confirmed and summed up by Jesus.

And it's royal because it belongs to Jesus our King. And it describes the lifestyle of those who belong to the kingdom. And that's why James says in verse 9, but if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

And so when we show favoritism, we're lawbreakers because we fail to love our neighbors. And that's a summary of God's law. And of course, our neighbor isn't just a person on our street.

Jesus extended neighbor to include all people. And so we're to love when it's costly and when it's complicated. Not just to love when it's convenient and when it's comfortable.

And I guess we should be asking ourselves, well, how well do I love those around me? Whoever they may be. Because if favoritism is a sin against God, then it's serious.

[18 : 03] Because it's not a failure just to love people. It is a failure to love God because it breaks God's law. And James illustrates this in verse 10 and 11.

See what he says. So what's he saying?

He's saying that every sin is a serious offense against God. And so no matter how good we think we are at keeping most of God's law, he's saying violating just one part makes you a lawbreaker, as if you've broken all of it.

Stumbling at just one point means you're guilty of breaking the whole law. And that's why James mentions adultery and murder. Because if you haven't committed adultery and you have murdered, then you're a lawbreaker.

Or to put it another way, we can't ignore somebody and think, well, it's okay because at least I haven't murdered them. And at least I haven't committed adultery with their spouse.

[19 : 18] So I'm fine. God is good with this. It's okay to ignore people. But what James is saying, if you don't show love towards someone, then you're still convicted as a lawbreaker.

Even if you haven't murdered them or committed adultery. Well, why? Well, the command to love your neighbor is at the heart of all of God's law, isn't it? And so we're guilty.

And if we're guilty, then we must be judged, which is what James moves on to in verse 12 and 13.

He 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. So James closes this section by reminding us not to take on the role as judge. There is only one judge and it isn't me or you.

And so we've got no right to judge anyone, he's saying, because we ourselves will be judged. And it's a sobering reminder that should really cause us to pause before we speak and before we act.

[20 : 29] And James, I think, is echoing the teaching of Jesus here on the Sermon on the Mount because it's so familiar. Jesus said in Matthew 5, blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.

And then in Matthew 7, he said, do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way as we judge others, you will be judged. And with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. And then James, in a sense, summarizes Jesus' teaching by saying judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment. What's he saying? Well, if you profess to be a Christian, if you're a follower of Jesus, then you are someone who knows that mercy triumphs over judgment. Because you know that you deserve God's judgment. And yet God has shown you his mercy. And so when we know our desperate need of God's mercy, then we've got to let mercy triumph over judgment when it comes to the way that we treat other people.

[21 : 37] Because if we want mercy from God, then we must show mercy to those who need it from us. And so James here doesn't want all of this just to be a theory in our head.

He doesn't just want this to be knowledge in our brain. He wants this to be the practice of our lives all through the week. And also the practice of our church every time we meet. Because the evidence of a genuine faith will be the refusal to judge or discriminate between people. And so we won't separate from people.

Or worse, ignore people. Instead, we'll aim to reach out to others in love, care, mercy, patience. That's why it matters. It's a sin if we don't.

And so firstly, what's the problem? Favoritism. Secondly, why it matters. It's a sin. Thirdly and finally, well, how do we prevent this? How do we prevent the kind of favoritism that is sinful, that is offensive towards God?

[22 : 42] How do we stop it? Well, James' answer is essentially to grasp the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because the remedy James gives is not just try harder.

The remedy comes in Jesus. So he's using the gospel of Jesus Christ to diagnose as well as cure the problem of favoritism.

And it's been implicit in everything he said in these verses. But he makes it explicit in the first thing he says in verse 1. Because he says, My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

Now, apart from the very beginning of James' letter, this is the only mention he makes of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so James is reminding his readers who it is that they belong to.

He's saying, you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Who is the Lord Jesus Christ? James is saying, he is the Lord of glory. He is glorious.

[23 : 49] And so James wants his readers to see the glory of Jesus. To remember who Jesus is. But also to remember what Jesus became for them.

And the Apostle Paul put it like this. He said, The Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor. So that we, through his poverty, might become rich.

And so the gospel of Jesus Christ reminds us of our poor, pitiful state before God. And that is why we have got no right to regard anyone as being less worthy of God's gospel, a welcome from God, than us.

And why we can't show favoritism or make distinctions among ourselves. And yet we can be so busy judging others that we forget that what really matters is not what we think of other people, but what God thinks of us.

Because without our glorious Lord Jesus, we're covered in the filth of our sin. And we are actually a detestable stench to God.

[25 : 07] We're unclean. And even all our righteous acts are like filthy rags, as Isaiah 64 tells us. And that is why the Lord Jesus came to die for our sin, because it separates us from God.

We can't ever be welcomed to God as we are. And so Jesus on the cross took God's judgment on our sin so that we could receive God's mercy and be forgiven.

Because there's no other way for anyone to be accepted by God than through the death of Jesus on the cross. And so what James is saying reminds us that we are nothing more than a poor sinner in need of God's mercy.

And if Jesus, the Lord of glory, welcomes us, you, me, unworthy as we are, then who are we to discriminate amongst ourselves?

And so as we better grasp who Jesus is, the glorious Lord, and what Jesus became for us, the suffering servant who died on the cross, then we'll realize just how evil favoritism is.

[26 : 22] Because our identity and our worth, whoever we are, isn't found in what we've achieved in this world or who we are. It is found in Jesus. Nothing in ourselves.

And because the Lord Jesus has this noble name that James speaks of, this honorable name, then there's no greater privilege in life than belonging to Jesus Christ.

There is nothing better, nothing greater. Because in Jesus, we are part of a new family, the church, a community of people who have discovered what really matters most in life.

That is not what you achieve, it is not who you are, it is not your status, your position, but it is being part of the family of God through Jesus.

And that's why we can't let any kind of outward appearance, whether it might be wealth or looks, beauty, status, power, position, influence, or anything else deceive us into how we judge a person.

[27 : 26] Because the church of the Lord Jesus has got to be the only place on this earth where all the human barriers that divide people, like economic barriers, social barriers, cultural barriers, ethnic barriers, all of these barriers are broken down in Christ's church.

And so if we are going to prevent favoritism and to love our neighbor, what do we need to do? Well, we need to see our glorious Lord Jesus Christ and remember what he became on the cross for us.

For people who are unlovely and undeserving, he was willing to die for you, for me, so that we could be accepted by God. And that is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, isn't it?

None of us are worthy. None of us deserve it. And yet in God's goodness, he sent his son to welcome us in. Amen.