

Show No Favouritism

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Date: 19 May 2019

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[0 : 00] The reading this evening is from James chapter 2 and can be found on page 1213 of the Church Bibles.

Beginning in verse 1. My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. 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.

Have you not discriminated amongst yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 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?

[1 : 16] If you really keep the royal law found in scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, you shall not commit adultery, also said, you shall not murder.

If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. 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. Thanks be to God. Well, thank you.

Thank you, Hayley, very much indeed for reading. And I'd be very grateful if you'd keep your Bibles open at James chapter 2, page 1213.

[2 : 21] It'll be a great help if you can look this over as we look at this part of God's word. Before we do, let's pray together. Let's pray. We thank you, Lord God, that you are a living God and that you speak to us living words.

And we pray now that you would please bring your living word to bear on our own lives. We pray that you would teach us and correct us and rebuke us and change us.

And we ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, for the next few Sunday evenings, we're going to be looking at James chapters 2 and 3.

We had a short series in chapter 1, ooh, quite a long time ago now. But we're going to be looking through James chapters 2 and 3. And I want to begin this evening with a question.

How do you get people who really are not getting on well with one another to admit that they have a problem? It's a tricky business.

[3 : 26] If you've ever been involved in conflict resolution of any sort, you'll know that it's difficult. And if you've tried to bring people together who are fighting with one another, you'll know that you approach such situations with your heart and your mouth.

Because people very quickly become entrenched in their positions. It's their fault, not my fault. I'm entirely justified in being angry.

I have every right to speak in the way that I have. Don't dare criticize me. You have not been on the receiving end of what they did. And so on. This letter is written, I think, to deal with that kind of relational breakdown.

Because no matter where you turn in this letter, you meet really horrible behavior. Uncontrolled speech. People who are angry towards one another. People who love money and power but not one another.

Christians who are not looking after one another as they should. Envy. Selfish ambition. Destructive speech among church leaders. Self-indulgence. Quarreling. Fighting.

[4 : 34] Fighting. That's an interesting one. Fighting. Slander. Murderous hatred. It's a terrible list as you go through this letter. And the purpose of this letter is to bring people back from that.

To loving one another. And the headline command is, I think, in chapter 1, verse 22. Just turn to chapter 1, verse 22, please. I'm sorry, verse 21.

Here's the great imperative of the letter. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that's so prevalent. That's the bad behavior that he refers to all the way through the letter.

And humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Stop behaving like that, says James. And start believing the gospel message all over again.

But how to make people do that? That's the question. It's not so easy to stop people behaving horribly to one another. Take a domestic example.

[5 : 40] Those of you who are parents will know this one well. You're at home. It is a peaceful Saturday afternoon. You're just settling down to the cup final. Suddenly, there are shrieks from next door.

And you go through and everyone's in tears. What happened? You say, she did it, he says. He did it, he says. And so it goes on. Let me ask you, parents. When did it ever work to say, just stop doing that and be nice to one another?

When did ever that help? It's a totally useless strategy. Now, it is going to take James another four chapters to build an argument big enough to get people to turn around.

Where does he start? Where do you start to open a can of worms so that it doesn't make a terrible mess all over the table? How do you begin to get behind the defenses of people who are entrenched?

Well, we're going to look at the first of James's attempts in chapter two. Where does he start? Well, with a couple of very hypothetical looking examples.

[6 : 45] And we're going to look at the first of these today. And I've called this talk rather prosaically, Getting Behind the Defenses, part one. We're going to look this evening at an everyday example and a penetrating question and a strong command.

Let's look at the everyday example. The example is in verses one to four. An example of things not being the way they ought to be. Now, it's a hypothetical example.

But it's such an everyday example that I can guarantee that every person here in the room will be able to identify with it. It's an example of choosing people. Just suppose, he says, verse two, just suppose that one day two people come into church one after the other.

A church that believes that Jesus is the Lord of glory, King of kings and Lord of lords. That's the one we worship here. And the first person through the door is a seriously impressive looking person.

He has a smart suit and beautiful shoes and a crisp white shirt and a silk tie and a very expensive looking watch and a big shiny ring. It's a serious looking person.

- [7 : 55] And immediately after comes through a rather grubby guy in clothes that he looks as though he slept in. And he doesn't look great and he doesn't smell great either. And just suppose when they come in, they are not quite related to the same way.
- Is it possible to imagine that? Well, suppose that happens, says James. Now look at verse four. Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?
- Judges with evil thoughts. That's what you're doing. It's quite strong that, isn't it? And though it's a hypothetical example, don't you get the feel the finger is beginning to point? You have become judges with evil thoughts.
- Here's an example then of people who see themselves as being believers in a glorious Lord. But the thing that really drives them is the glory of the world.
- The impressive looking person. Why does James use this example? Well, because he knows his readers are like this, I think. Despite the fact that they recognize Jesus to be the Lord of glory, what impresses them is this smart looking person.
- [9 : 12] What motivates them is exactly the sort of thing that motivates the behavior of the world around them. How desperate that is. Look back at chapter one, verse 27.
127. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and keep oneself from being polluted by the world.
- The kind of life that God loves to see in his children is one that does not relate to the world and the same people in the same way the world does. We naturally love those who reward us in some way.
- God loves those who can't. The widow, the orphan, they've not got great earning potential. And God loves it when his people aren't just driven by the same things that motivate the world.
- And yet in chapter two, we have an example of people driven by just the same things that the world is driven by. There's an impressive person.
- [10 : 19] Could be to our advantage. Let's be nice to them. You just sit over there. And in response to this, James asks a penetrating question.
- Verse five. And the question is basically this. What is God like? 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?
- What's God like? Well, he chooses the sorts of people that no one would choose. He chooses differently from us. Think for a moment of how choosing works in life.
- Let's take it right back as far as you can remember choosing in your own life. For me, it's the school playground at lunchtime and choosing for football teams.
- I don't know what it was for you, but something similar, I guess. How does it work in the football thing at lunchtime? Well, we all know how it works. The two best players get to be captains.
- [11 : 28] They always get to be captains. Nobody different ever gets to be captain. That's how it works. And what they do? Well, they choose the next best people and then the next best people and then the next best people until there's a rather unfortunate little group remaining who want to be in the game, but nobody really wants to choose them.
- The not wanted in the playground. Now, no doubt that is a painful memory for many of us. It may, of course, be present experience for some of us.
- The world honors the high and brings down the low. And the world maintains and exaggerates the existing differences between people.

And, says James, God is not a bit like that. We choose those who will benefit us most. The next best player in the football team.

But God doesn't choose like that for he has nothing at all to gain from us. He made us what we are. He gave us everything we have. He needs nothing. We can't give him anything that's not already his by rights.

[12 : 38] His choices are absolutely not based on what he can get from us. And so he chooses for his team players who, in the eyes of the world, are rubbish players.

And he gives them massive rewards. He chooses all sorts of people, doesn't he? The ones who might easily be left at the end of the list in the playground, in the game of spiritual football.

I mean, just look around the room, folks. Just look around the room. The spiritual elite. The man city of the gospel game.

Do you think? Just look around the room. Look at yourself. Look at me. God does not display the world's kind of partiality. He doesn't judge according to externals.

He treats everyone the same. Rich and poor alike. This is actually very important. It's important to add this. It's not that God judges the opposite way from us. We honor the rich, but he honors the poor.

[13 : 40] He dishonors the rich. No. The point is that he deals with everyone the same. Rich or poor. I'd like you to turn on to chapter 4, verse 6, please. It's a key verse in this letter.

And if you've got, if there's one verse you want to learn from James, this would be a great one to learn. Chapter 4, verse 6. A quotation from Proverbs chapter 3.

Scripture says, Notice, it's not God opposes the rich, but shows favor to the poor.

It's God opposes the proud, rich or poor, and shows favor to the humble, poor or rich. He deals with everyone the same. Anyone who's willing to humble themselves before God, God accepts.

Anyone who's proud, God opposes. In this example in chapter 2, James' readers do exactly the opposite of that.

[14 : 44] Look at verse 6.

Look at verse 6. 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?

Now this doesn't mean that it's always the rich that are the persecutors of Christians, or that the rich people are automatically the persecutors of Christians. The point is that here, the ones who are getting the good treatment are not just the rich, but those who James knows are actually giving his readers a hard time.

And they're being honored. Why might that be? Well, in this letter, there's a degree of persecution in the background. It's impossible to know exactly the circumstances of those that James is writing to.

But certainly within reach of this letter, there appear to be some rich people who are persecuting and some who are experiencing financial hardship as a result of that persecution.

[15 : 56] And it's ever so easy, isn't it, to see how that might make you behave extra nicely to the rich who turns up at church and to ignore those who are suffering perhaps at their hands?

So James asks this penetrating question. What is God like? Answer, well, he chooses all sorts, including the sorts of people the world would never choose.

He will accept and reward any person who humbles themselves before him. And says James to his readers, you guys, at the moment, are choosing just the way the world does.

And you've got to ask yourself questions. Now, folks, it's very easy, isn't it, to let our behavior be driven by things to do with what people can offer us.

At its most basic level, who we'll choose for our team in the playground? Who we'll tell the gospel to? Will we tell the gospel to people who look like they'll respond and that will make us feel good?

[17 : 03] Or will we tell the gospel to anyone because God can rescue anyone? Who will we put ourselves out for? Different people get different things from us, don't they? What they get is often dependent on very superficial things to do with them or to do with things that they can give to us.

And as much as we find ourselves doing this, it shows we have set ourselves up as judges of what's what and who's who.

That our assessment of the importance of people or their validity or their spiritual usefulness is the assessment that we will work from.

And if we do that, says James, that's just being like the world. But it's not only how God chooses that's in view in this section. It's what God desires.

Look at verse 8. If you really keep the royal law found in scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you're doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

[18 : 10] For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said you shall not commit adultery also said you shall not murder.

But if you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you've become a lawbreaker. There's a question here implied here.

What does God desire of his people? And that question is, I think, at the heart of this section. Answer, God desires the same kind of love towards people that he himself shows to us.

The gospel that puts people right with God vertically has horizontal implications for his people. God chooses people to be in his kingdom, verse 5.

And that kingdom has a way of doing things, a way of relating. He calls it a royal law, verse 8, the law of the king. God is a lover of all sorts of people.

[19 : 11] And his commandments show him to be loving. Notice that all the commands here are do not commit adultery, do not murder, and the command to love neighbor as self.

All of these commands are specifically ones that Jesus deals with in his own teaching. And in each occasion, they are commands that he pushes beyond people's outward actions to people's heart attitudes.

So, love for other people from the heart is supposed to be what the gospel looks like in its horizontal implications for God's people.

That's what our king wants. He loves, and he wants his people to love like him. But, verse 9, if you show this kind of favoritism, it shows you're not loving the way God does.

He's a lover of all sorts, and his laws show him to be loving. A personal example. In a church I once worked, it was an elderly man.

[20 : 13] By the time I knew him, quite doddery. Upper crust. Wealthy. Respectable. A city businessman. The wonderful thing about him was that if somebody came into church on Sunday morning with scary green hair and a nail through their nose, Ronnie would be the first person to shake their hand.

He was just relentless in pursuit of all sorts of people. People quite unlike him. In that, he was very like the God he loved. Not these people.

James senses a real division of heart in his readers. Verse 11. They're divided. How would it be if you asked me next week, or even this evening, how is your walk with God doing?

And I said, well, you know, you win some, you lose some. I didn't commit adultery today, and that's good, because it does make up for the fact that I got so angry with someone at work this week that I could have murdered them.

Now, what are you going to say to me if I say that? Well, what you ought to say to me is, have you gone out of your mind? These are God's good laws. These things don't balance one another out.

[21 : 37] Have you confessed your sins to the Lord and humbled yourself and sought forgiveness? That's what you need. James says to his readers, you're as divided in your love for people as the person who doesn't commit adultery but does commit murder.

Here's the point then. God chooses and loves all sorts, and his people are to do the same. And, says James, neither adultery nor murderous anger nor the kind of favoritism the world shows is like God at all.

You see what James is beginning to do here? He looks at the way God chooses, and he says, look at what God is like. And he looks at the way, at God's good commands, and says, look how good God is.

And now look at yourselves. Your behavior makes it look very much as though you think you know better than them, for you choose differently, and you love differently.

You have, he says to them, made yourselves judges. So then, an everyday example, a penetrating question.

[22 : 52] What's God like in the way he chooses and the way he loves? And third, and quickly, a strong command. And the commands in 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's not been merciful.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. What I think James desires here is that his listeners would turn around from this divided way of relating towards people and respond rightly to God.

that they would act and speak as those who are going to be judged by the gospel word, the gospel word that comes to all people the same. There's a threat here, isn't there?

Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who's not been merciful. But notice there's also an encouragement. Mercy triumphs over judgment. judgment. And I think the point is here that justice and judgment has not been God's last word on human beings.

God has been just and merciful at the same time, not treated us as our sins deserve, but overflowed in mercy towards us through the death of the Lord Jesus.

[24 : 12] Jesus. Well, folks, our time is gone. Let me just make some applications of this for ourselves. You may be here just visiting, just looking in at the Christian message for yourselves.

If you are, well, welcome. It's great to have you here this evening. This message has mainly been for Christians, and that's because the book is written to Christians behaving badly. And of course, the reality is that Christians behave badly.

It's not uncommon, and it's probably not a surprise to you if you've been around them for any length of time. But if you look around you, you'll see a whole range of people who would not normally be here in the same room.

Just look around. We would not normally be in the same room together. And that is because the Christian message is not about joining the club of people who are the same as you or of getting your act together spiritually, but rather about a God who takes our lives with great seriousness and justly assesses them and yet offers mercy and forgiveness to people who humble themselves before him.

And that, of course, is exactly what the Christians in the room have experienced. And you may be doing well in the playground choosings of life, or you may find yourself in the not-wanted group.

[25 : 33] Whichever group you find yourself in, the wonderful thing, the liberating thing about the Christian message, is that God accepts people not because of their performance, but rather in spite of it.

And if you're intrigued by that, let me say you'll not find anything like that anywhere else in the world. So come back and learn more. Let me say something to the angry believer.

Believers sometimes find themselves very angry with one another. And it may be that terrible things have been done to you by other believers, or said to you by other believers.

Here's a question then, to chew over. How has God treated you? Well, that needs to show in the lives of his children too.

That they let mercy triumph, give mercy, open door in their lives and their relationships. Not of course, that that ignores wrongs that have been done.

[26 : 48] Justice is real. Judgments are real. But rather, God has not behaved towards us as though judgment is the only thing. By rights, he did not have to have mercy on us.

But he's chosen to have wonderful mercy on us. If you find yourself angry and you know the mercy that God has shown to you, can you pray that that might help you with your anger?

Third, for those who are going okay in their relationships with one another, there are some of us, some of those. Let me just say that that is a thing not to take for granted.

The unity of a church family is not something ever to be taken for granted. We are going through potentially stretching times as a church family.

And one of the messages of this letter is that pressure can make people angry with one another and fall out with one another in all kinds of unexpected ways.

[28 : 00] So it would be a really good thing, not just now, but always, to pray for your brothers and sisters in Christ and the unity of the congregation that God would continue to make mercy triumph over judgment in the way we relate to one another.

That would be a good thing, wouldn't it? Wouldn't it? Well, folks, let's have a moment to reflect on what God has said to us personally. Just a minute of quiet and then I'll lead us in prayer.

Amen. Here again, these quite remarkable words.

God opposes the proud, but unexpectedly, wonderfully, shows favor to the humble. We thank you, Heavenly Father, for your wonderful kindness to us in your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

For the wonderful lengths that you've gone to so that justice might properly be done in relation to us and that we might receive mercy.

[29 : 49] And however we are, whoever we are, wherever we are in relationship with others this evening, we pray that the mercy that has been shown to us might overflow into our relationships with one another.

We ask these things for Jesus' sake and in his name. Amen.