

**Text: James 2:1-13**

**Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> January 2020**

**Brightons Parish Church**

**Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.**

**Being the eldest child of three in my family gave me quite a different experience from my wife I suspect – in my family, my parents had to walk that fine line of never showing that they had a favourite child, though the same can never be said of my gran because I was her only grandson and so of course I was the favourite boy. And that's probably quite like my wife's experience, for being the only child, she's naturally the favourite. I don't remember my sisters and I ever accusing my parents of having favourites, but I came across **this picture online:****

*'My kids are always accusing me of having a favourite child, which is ridiculous because I don't really like any of them.'*

**I'm sure no parent has ever said that! It's easy to have a laugh at such silly examples of overt favouritism, or lack thereof, and I suspect that if we did a quick survey, none of us would be in favour of favouritism.**

**And so, when we read from James** about favouritism in the early church, we probably think, "how could you be so silly?" and we likely feel that we've rooted out favouritism in our lives and in our church.

**But I suspect that favouritism is deeply hidden in us, working unconsciously to undermine the life we live as a community of believers in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ, and it's when we dig in to what is wrong with favouritism that we can then more clearly see where favouritism may lurk in our own lives.**

**So, what's wrong with favouritism? Based on our passage I want to give you four things to take away.**

**Firstly, favouritism honours the wrong things.** In verses 2 to 4, James describes a situation where two individuals are treated so very differently. There's some debate in the commentaries about whether this scene is real or hypothetical, whether it's a church service with individual Christians involved, or something else entirely.

The clearest description for me, was that these verses may describe two visitors who are unlikely to be Christian and they are coming to a Christian gathering where the general populace is also welcome to attend. They have to be shown where to be seated for example.

**But whatever the case, what James describes here is realistic enough to maybe be drawn from personal experience, or maybe a report he has heard, and people could well imagine this type of thing happening: a rich man walks in and is treated so very differently from the poor man. Clearly one has rank and money, the other does not.**

**And to that rich man, special attention is given, and he is conducted politely to his seat. The poor man, on the other hand, is told to “stand there” or “sit on the floor by my feet”. For no other reason than rank, money and thus valuing people for no other reason than external features, one person is treated with honour, whilst another is not even welcomed, is in fact put into a place of subjection, where the message is quite clear about whom and what the church values.**

**This example makes complete sense of the word ‘favouritism’ because it literally means ‘to receive someone according to their face’ – according to what you see of them – and James says that to discriminate in such a manner, to judge in such a manner, is ‘evil’, it is wicked, which is some pretty strong language. But if God is good, and He Himself has no favourites, if He shows no partiality, then to do so, to discriminate is less than good and thus involves thoughts, words and actions which are evil.**

**Favouritism honours the wrong things, in particular it honours external things, and we know that to be wrong because we know that God does not act in that way, we’re probably familiar with the words of the Lord to the prophet Samuel: ‘The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.’ (1 Samuel 16:7)**

**Favouritism honours the wrong things, especially external things. Do we do that, friends? I'm almost tempted to come along next Sunday in jeans – I'd probably still wear a shirt and jacket – but if I did that, if I wore jeans, if I wore what I'm more comfortable in, would you think differently of me? You might not treat me differently, because we're good at hiding our feelings, but inside, would your estimation of me drop? Or could you look past the external and honour what matters most – someone's heart as they come to worship the Lord?**

**It's a silly example in many ways, but likely there are external things which we honour, and those things in the sight of God do not matter, and as such, we are honouring the wrong things, we are showing favouritism.**

**Another way that favouritism honours** the wrong things is with a focus on what will benefit us most. In verses 5 to 7, James continues to build his case against favouritism. He points out in verse 5 that it is amongst the poor that the church has seen incredible growth, it is the poor who have responded in faith and love to God.

It is such people, 'poor in the eyes of the world', destitute, it is these folks who have become rich in faith and will inherit the kingdom of God; they are paupers in the eyes of the world with seemingly so little to give, but they are now rich beyond measure for they are heirs of Christ.

And what is so striking, going into verse 6, is that the church has dishonoured such people. The church of James' time has actively insulted, humiliated,...



**even oppressed the poor, by favouring the rich. Yet, what is mind-boggling, is that it is the rich who are persecuting the church and ridiculing the name of Jesus, and yet the church is chasing their approval, is chasing the favour of such people. Favouritism honours the wrong things and does so here by focusing on what will most benefit us whilst rejecting that which seemingly offers us so little in return.**

**Once again, this may seem distant to our lives, for we're probably not trying to curry favour with people who oppress us because thankfully we don't live in a land of persecution where that temptation could be very real.**

**But favouritism honours the wrong things and it does so by focusing on who or what will benefit us most, what will profit us most, and in our time, **I think the application of this principle is that we tend towards a favouritism of self.****

**If there is anyone we favour, we favour ourselves – we do things for our benefit and what will profit us – and in doing so we honour the wrong things, we show favouritism.**

**Within a church context, that flavour of favouritism, the favouritism of self, can be stirred up by just about anything. Whether we liked the hymns or not. Whether the children were quiet enough or not. Whether the intimations were short enough so that the children didn't have to be quiet for too long.**

**And when a church operates with regard to the favouritism of self, do you know what gets pushed out? God and His purposes. I remember on once occasion, when I was a really young Christian, about 20 at the time, I remember being on a summer mission trip in Scotland and a group of us were running a holiday club for a church...**

**We duly went along to church on Sunday and everything within me reacted against the minister. I grumbled to my friend Laurie, both during and after the service, about how I didn't get anything from the sermon, that this guy was talking rubbish. And Laurie, who is the same age as me, but had been a Christian for a bit longer, Laurie turns round and shows me the pages of notes that he took that morning and what he said will stay with me: "There's always something there if we're listening for God's voice."**

**Now Laurie and myself, even now, are in favour of good and right teaching, because God clearly emphasises in the Scriptures the importance of good and right teaching. But my point is this: I had turned Sunday worship into something that was all about me, and if it didn't fit my flavour and tick my boxes, I wrote it off and I grumbled. Rather than coming simply to worship God,...**

**in whatever form was on offer that day; rather than coming to give Him the honour that is His due by laying down my agenda, I actually made it about me. But what if I had laid down my agenda and favoured my self less? What might I have heard from God?**

**Friends, when it comes to church, too often what we do, what we decide, what we invest our time and our money in, what we make our priorities, is done for self, is done for our benefit, our profit, and so God and His purposes are pushed out. Favouritism focuses on self, but we are called to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength – that is a call which is not about self; and God also calls us to go make disciples of all the nations and that's not about us either; what is more, Jesus said, 'The greatest among you will be your servant', He taught that,...**

**‘Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’ – brothers and sisters, we are called to a costly way of life, to pick up our cross, to give of our lives for others and for the Lord. That’s why favouritism is so wrong, because it honours the wrong things – it focuses on the external and it focuses on self. I wonder where we might be doing these things?**

**But favouritism has another side as well – it not only honours the wrong things, it dishonours God.**

**In verses 8 to 11, James speaks of the ‘royal law found in Scripture’ and then quotes and illustrates from God’s law. Now, we might be tempted to think that the royal law is simply ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ and I think we do this because in our culture we often talk about there being a golden rule. So, we might make the easy mistake...**

**of thinking that ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ is the golden rule and so is the royal law.**

**But in speaking of the royal law, James is referring to the king’s law, to the commands, the way of life, given by the King, and that King is Jesus, the Christ. For ‘Christ’ means, ‘the anointed one’, that promised Messiah, that King who would come to bring God’s Kingdom upon the earth.**

**So, James is referring to the whole of God’s commands but as Jesus Himself highlighted, the second greatest commandment is to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ for it is the basis for many other laws. As a result, James can then speak of these other laws in verse 11, of ‘you shall not commit adultery’, ‘you shall not murder’, for these are underpinned by the love we give to others, specifically the honour we bestow to other human beings...**

**Murder is a clear case of dishonouring the victim, but adultery is as well, because it demonstrates in unmistakable ways that personal gratification is more important than spouse or children or family, and so dishonours them.**

**By referencing these commands here, James is seeking to help us see that favouritism should be equated with these most horrific of sins because favouritism similarly breaks the command to love your neighbour as yourself.**

**And so, if you break one command, you've in effect broken the whole law, because it is indivisible, they are all the royal law, the law of the King, and to break just one is to disobey the King and render us guilty before Him. As a result, we end up breaking the greatest commandment, to love the Lord your God with every fibre of your being. Favouritism, not only honours the wrong things, it dishonours God,...**

**because when we show favouritism, we not only fail to love our neighbour, we fail to love the Lord.**

**Rightly then, James says, ‘but if you show favouritism, you sin...’ (v9) – it truly is that serious, and as such it leads James to remind his readers of the divine judgment that awaits us all. **He wrote:** ‘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.’ (James 2:12-13)**

**There will be a judgment, Jesus said so Himself too, and it will be against ‘the law that gives freedom’. But to describe the law that way may sound odd to us, because we may feel that God’s law is restricting, that it limits our choice.**



**But in saying that the law gives freedom, James is in accord with all of Scripture and the teaching of Jesus, that God's Word, His law, is given, not to hinder life, but to protect and further life; it's not a law of bondage, it's a law of freedom; and when we heed God's law it will bring us into greater freedom, greater blessing and fullness of life than we can ever know apart from it.**

**I'm sure many of us have known that experience, when we would rather have gone our own way, and maybe we did many times, yet it did not lead to the life we thought it would, instead it led to dissatisfaction, maybe greater brokenness, even to a form of bondage.**

**But I hope we've also known the reverse, of giving up our own way, of heeding God's way,...**

**and so finding greater life, greater freedom because we've walked in obedience to Him and His royal law.**

**How we live our lives will be judged against this law, against God's Word, including the favouritism we have shown, and as we've seen, that law of God exhorts us towards love and kindness, towards humility and the service of others. God's Word exhorts such behaviour not to earn salvation, not to make ourselves worthy enough for God to accept us, because that's not why God gave us His Word, it's not even why He gave the law to Israel. God's Word, His law, has always been secondary to His grace, His mercy. His law is given to help us live out the salvation we already have.**

**James opened in v1 with these words: ‘My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism.’ (James 2:1)**

**James is saying, that if you claim to be a Christian, if you claim to be part of the people of God, if you claim to have salvation in the name of Jesus, then it’s time to act like it, it’s time to live in accord with the law of the King, and it’s time to show love and kindness, to show humility and put others first, because after all that’s what Jesus did for us.**

**The Apostle Paul put it this way: ‘For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.’ (2 Cor. 8:9)**

**On the cross Jesus gave His life for you, He gave up the glory and honour of heaven, to be born...**

**amongst the muck of the stable and to be killed upon the humiliation of the cross, for love of you and love of me; He humbled Himself, taking the very nature of a servant and becoming obedient even to death itself.**

**Such love, such grace, if truly known, if personally accepted, must leave its impact upon us if our faith be genuine. And so, **James echoes** the teaching of Jesus in the parable of the merciful servant: ‘judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.’ (James 2:13)**

**It’s not that our mercy earns divine mercy, but that our mercy flows from the mercy we’ve received from God. **As Jesus Himself said**, ‘whoever has been forgiven little loves little’, and conversely, whoever loves much has been forgiven much.**

**Because when we come to realise that at the cross Jesus paid the penalty, He faced the judgment that we truly deserve, then it leaves its mark. For a holy, loving God cannot overlook any degree of wrongdoing, there must be justice, there must be judgment, for otherwise He violates His own nature, His own perfection. So in love, God sent Jesus, to ensure that justice was fully done, its claims were fully met, that there was judgment upon sin.**

**But in love God also sent Jesus to secure mercy wide and free. For upon Jesus, the sinless one, judgment came. He gave His life in sacrifice for many, that there might also now be forgiveness for many, the offer of salvation, for any who will accept it, allowing us to stand before the judgment seat of God not with our own record, our shabby worthless record,...**

but now instead we can come before God with the righteousness of Jesus, completely forgiven, the slate wiped clean, all sin forgotten.

It's when we come to own this, to know God's love and grace for ourselves, to know in the core of our being that we are forgiven and reconciled to God, at the sacrifice of Himself, well then we know that at the cross mercy triumphed over judgment, because the one perfect life was given for an imperfect you and me. That sacrifice leaves its mark, a mark that points towards God's grace and so gives Him the honour.

**But favouritism** dishonours God by mocking the triumph of the cross. Favouritism mocks mercy, it belittles the sacrifice of Jesus for it says His death has barely left a mark on us, that His death was insignificant.

**Favouritism should have** no place within the church, for it dishonours God and honours the wrong things.

In this early part of James chapter 2, we are called beyond the wisdom of the world, as Kenny reminded us in week 1. We are called to live according to the royal law, we are called to honour the triumph of the cross, to honour God first, and by dying to self, and fixing our eyes on the ways and values of God's kingdom we may then come to know true life and true freedom.

May it be so, amen.