

Favouritism - Part 1

by Alistair Begg

The sermon emphasizes the importance of genuine faith, which is characterized by compassion, a controlled tongue, and a willingness to show respect to those who are worthy of respect.

Duration: 39:39

Scripture: Exodus 33:15, Matthew 6:33, James 1:26 - 2:5, James 2:8

Topics: "Favouritism"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the danger of showing favoritism based on outward appearances. He warns believers against treating people differently based on their external characteristics. The preacher uses the example of someone arriving at a gathering to illustrate the point. He urges believers to avoid favoritism and treat all people equally. The sermon emphasizes the importance of following God's word and living in a way that reflects His mercy and judgment.

Transcript

James chapter 1 and beginning to read at verse 26. James chapter 1 verse 26. If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes and a poor man in shabby 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 among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers, 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 insulted 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 slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? 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. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said do not commit adultery also said do 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 for his word. And before we study the Bible together, we'll pause once again and ask for God's help.

Father, we come needy to you with the impact of all kinds of distractions clamoring for our attention and asking for the miraculous intervention of your spirit so that we might hear the very voice of God even through the voice of a mere man and that in hearing we might believe and obey and live in the light of your truth. We thank you that you've given us the Bible not simply to increase our knowledge but to change our lives. So change our lives we pray for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Well following the break for last Sunday morning for Easter Sunday, we return to our studies in James and I encourage you to be following along as we look to the Bible together. This is a profitable opportunity for me to remind us of the fact that when the New Testament was written, it did not have the chapter breaks in it that are present in our English translations.

And so James would not have been conscious of finishing chapter 1 and of beginning chapter 2. In fact there was no chapter 1 and no chapter 2. He was writing a letter and his letter was a long letter and it was a cohesive letter and as we've already discovered it was a thoroughly practical letter. And I mentioned that this morning and indeed began reading at the end of chapter 1 rather than at the beginning of chapter 2 in order that we might be very clear concerning this. Because the danger is that we turn as it were from chapter 1 into chapter 2 and treat the subject matter at the beginning of chapter 2 as if it was to be dealt with in isolation from what has gone before.

And nothing of course could be further from the truth. Because James is still in the same realm of thinking. A realm of thinking that really goes all the way back to verse 16 where he says don't be deceived and then in verse 19 take note of this and so on.

But particularly in verse 26, if anyone considers himself religious, he says, and yet doesn't keep a tight rein on his tongue, doesn't show compassion to those who are poor and needy, and doesn't remain with an uncompromising testimony before the world, then frankly that individual has a worthless religion. A worthless religion. And that's the distinction that comes at the end of chapter 1. The externalism that marks so many in his day and marks many in every generation that seeks somehow or another simply to maintain some kind of outward facade of religious expression is insufficient when it comes to God's understanding of things.

We define religion and I think helpfully and simply as the outward expressions of a living faith. That's what James is referencing here. There are outward expressions which are not representative of a faith which is alive.

But the faith which is alive, he says, will not only be a listening faith but it will be a believing faith and it will be a doing faith. And the kind of expressions of genuine faith that God the Father is interested in and

describes as being pure and faultless have to do with, number one, a controlled tongue, which James is going to tackle in chapter 3. A compassionate heart, which James is now about to tackle in chapter 2. And an uncompromised testimony, which James will deal with when he comes to chapter 4. But what he now does in the opening verses of chapter 2 is introduce us to the explosion or the expansion of what it means to be genuinely interested in those who are needy. He has identified the orphans and the widows not in a way that is exclusive to them but in a way that picks them out as being representative of those who, in a culture, are in need of care and compassion and need to discover the expressions of the gospel.

And very, very quickly he realizes that those who are the believers in the Lord Jesus may be tempted to differentiate between people and to forget what he has just said concerning a compassionate heart. Here, then, is a further test where an individual's profession of faith is challenged as he identifies what is a clear and present danger in his own day and, frankly, in every day--namely, the danger of treating people in different ways according to their outward appearance. The danger of treating people in different ways according to their outward appearance.

In short, the danger of favoritism. Favoritism. And he aptly and succinctly provides a nice illustration of this for these believers to whom he writes.

And paraphrasing what you have there in verses 2, 3, and 4, he says, let's say, for instance, that someone arrives at your gathering. Incidentally, the word here for gathering is synagogue, which is synagogue. It's an indication of how early the letter of James is and how Jewish terminology was interlaced with the developing Christian terminology in the establishing of the church.

He says, imagine that someone comes into your synagogue and he has the outward expressions of wealth. He is clad in fine raiment and he is adorned by gold. And simultaneously, another fellow shows up and he is obviously at the other end of the spectrum.

He's shabby, his clothes are in disrepair. What happens then, he says? If you give pride of place to the visitor who is rich and disregard the poor man, then, says James, you have discriminated in a fashion that doesn't look at all like those who profess to be the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is an uncomfortable book.

There is no question. Which of us can evade the immediate impact and challenge of this direct imperative? Don't show favoritism. I don't think we'll have any difficulty in understanding what he is saying, but it may be possible that some of us think he is saying more than what he's saying.

And therefore, we always, in studying our Bibles, need to be clear about what is being said, but also about what is not being said. And I think I need to make this point before we move ahead. He is not reducing everything and everyone to a common level.

The Bible doesn't do that. Some people love this section in James. I remember even as a boy, hearing vociferous arguments involving members of my extended family as I tried to get to sleep at night, and it all had to do with a sort of intermingling of socialism and communism and capitalism and the Bible, and it was going all over the place as I was falling asleep as a boy.

People arguing extensively and vociferously concerning what James was saying here. Everyone's the same. Everyone should be treated in the same way.

Everyone's on a common level and so on. Nobody gets a special seat here. Nobody is worthy of this.

Nobody gets that and so on. And anybody who does has missed the point entirely. Well, in my reading this week, I came across a sentence by Alec Matea where he said, the Bible is too courteous a book to allow us to lack proper respect for people to whom respect is due.

I thought that's wonderful. I must underline that. And I did.

The Bible is too courteous a book to allow us to lack proper respect for people to whom respect is due. You see, James is not condemning preferential treatment out of hand. James is not saying that, for example, to honor an elderly woman at the expense of a youth's seat would be to fall foul of his instruction.

Oh, our society may be so egalitarian, and we may have lost all respect for age so as to forget this in its entirety. But the Bible is far too nice a book to forget this. It is perfectly understandable that a boy would be asked, Would you please give up your seat and sit on the floor so that Mrs. Jenkins can sit on this night seat? Is there anything wrong with that at all? No, it is a sign of respect.

It is respect for age and youth takes its place in relationship to age. If word were given that the president of the United States were attending the following service at 1115, I don't think any single person in the room would be at all surprised if special preparation were not made for his arrival and the exact location of his seat. Would there be anything wrong in that? Nothing wrong in it at all.

That is not what James is talking about here. He is not talking about that. If he were, then he would be contradicting the rest of the Bible.

You would only need to turn forward a couple of pages to 1 Peter 2, where Peter says, Show proper respect for everyone, love the brothers, fear God, and honor the king. And we will just leave the king part out for now, but you get the point. I replaced it with a president just so that you would feel much more at home.

We don't need to go back 200 years in your history and go on to that stuff. No, but the clarity and forcefulness of James teaching is not setting aside those kind of expressions of honor. If we had members of our armed forces here that had come back from Iraq, we recognize the dignity of their sacrifice and their willingness to serve.

I would be very happy to move to clear out a whole section of seats in order that they might be put in position and so that we might say thank you and that we might honor them by their presence. Would there be anything wrong with that? Would that be a violation of James 1, 2, 1 to 4? No, it would not. Not for a moment.

So, we need to be clear when we set out to discover what the Bible is saying to make sure what it is not saying. What he is making absolutely painstakingly clear is this, that wealth does not in and of itself deserve honor. Wealth in and of itself does not deserve honor.

If you think about it, it is only God who makes it possible for anybody to become wealthy in any case. Therefore, the wealthy person, whether he recognizes God's common grace or not, is only in that position as a result of God's goodness to him or to her. Therefore, that person should never be a snob in the first place, and no gathering of God's people should then accord or afford to such an individual, at the expense of someone less prosperous, peculiar positions of authority or leadership or stature or status.

Now, you are sensible people. You can read the Bible and look there and see whether that is in fact what is being said. Phillips paraphrases the opening verse as follows, Don't ever attempt, my brothers, to combine snobbery with faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

Don't ever attempt to combine snobbery with faith in Jesus. In fact, in one punch to the he gives to us the instruction that he is providing, don't show favoritism. That's the instruction, really.

The illustration is what then follows. But before we even get to the instruction, there is a twofold description, which we may very quickly pass by. And to do so would be a dreadful mistake.

I almost did it myself. I almost went immediately to don't show favoritism in my study so that the impact and the punch and so on of the central teaching would come home forcibly. But then I said to myself, this isn't padding the opening sentence, my brothers as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

So what I want us to do is to notice the description that he gives first of his readers and then of the Lord Jesus. My brothers, he says. Why are they his brothers? Well, because they are believers.

Because they are believers. Now, we shouldn't just jump immediately to that and say, well, that makes perfect sense. Because we need to recall that the brothers of Jesus, his earthly brothers, did not believe in Jesus.

They were not believers. They played games with their brother Jesus. They were involved in the family life with their brother Jesus, but they did not believe in Jesus.

John chapter 7 verse 5 tells us that even his brothers did not believe in him. Other people were believing in Jesus, but James and the rest did not believe in Jesus. So what happened? Well, there came a time when he who did not believe began to believe.

You see, when James writes in this way to the believers, we shouldn't think of him writing to a group of people who have some vague intellectual awareness of the existence of a person called Jesus of Nazareth. He's not writing to people who have made an intellectual ascent to historical facts or to bits and pieces of information about a Jesus. It is impossible to embrace in a believing way Jesus until we understand the historicity and reality of who he is and what he's done.

But it is possible for us to have an intellectual grasp of these things without ourselves ever having to have become believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. So a believer in Jesus is able to look back to a precious moment or precious moments or a period of time in his or her life where consciously and personally they moved from a state of unbelief to a state of belief. Or in the case of some nurtured in a Christian home who moved from a position whereby their belief was in the environment of their home, imbibed in some senses from their parents.

But there came a day or a point in their lives where, as it were, they were tipped out of the nest and they came to themselves to a personal understanding and belief and trust in Jesus. They realized that Jesus is a Savior and that they were sinners and that they needed a Savior and that they needed to ask Jesus to be their Savior and to be their friend. That's what it means to believe.

That's why Lydia in Acts 16, prosperous businesswoman, with a prayer meeting, a lady's Bible study, if you like, down by the river. Anybody would have said, oh, Lydia, she's in tune. There's a believer, Lydia.

She has prayer meetings. Such a nice lady, Lydia. And Paul the apostle shows up at the prayer meeting and the Lord, says Luke, opened her heart.

And she, who was a religious worshiper of God, became a believer. A believer. In the same passage in Acts 16, the Philippian jailer makes the same shift, doesn't he? The earthquake happens, the chains are loosed, he thinks that the prisoners are all going to escape.

He's about ready to kill himself because he knows that's will be his destiny if the word gets out that they're all gone. Paul shouts, don't do yourself any harm. He says, I heard you singing all night there and I couldn't believe you were singing.

Most people are cursing. And you keep singing about this risen Jesus, how he is a Savior and a Lord of the king. Can I just ask you guys, what must I do to be saved? And Paul says, well, if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved.

And if your family believe as well, they'll be saved. So down by the riverside, and then in the context of the jail, we have these baptismal services. Why? Because they were making public expression of their private, personal belief in Jesus.

Do you believe? Do you believe? You see, when you get to verse 5, and you needn't worry about that because we won't really get there this morning, but when you look at verse 5, and he says, listen, my dear brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith? You need to realize that the fact of God's choosing doesn't deny the necessity and reality of our believing. The fact of God's choosing does not deny the necessity and reality of our believing. People ask me this question just about every single Sunday.

Well, if God chooses us, I suppose we don't have anything to do with it at all. No, absolutely wrong. We have everything to do with it.

God does not believe for us. We must believe. That's why today we are either believing or we're unbelieving.

John Murray, the late Professor John Murray, in a wonderful passage in one of his books, uses this illustration, and I share it for your help. He says, we must never ignore the necessity of personal acceptance and trust. The lifeboat is no good unless the drowning man gets into it, and no one can get in for him.

He must do it for himself. Yet surely he would never say that the hand which seized the lifeboat was his salvation. He could only view it as the means by which he apprehended the proffered safety.

See, the only thing we bring to our salvation is the sin for which we need forgiveness. And when we reach out the hand of faith, we are simply taking the safety that is proffered to us in the provision that Jesus has made. And it is in that divine transaction, in that moment, in that experiential moment in time, that all of the secret dimensions of the purposes of God become ours in their fullness and in their focus.

Alec Metea puts it as follows, new life in Christ may trace its conscious and public history back to the moment of decision, of commitment, of accepting the Lord Jesus as one's personal Savior. Is there in your life a moment of decision, of commitment, of accepting the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior? That's the question. That's the question.

Because if there isn't, how in the world do you believe that you believe? If you don't know that you were married on a certain day, prior to that day you were unmarried, and after that day you were married, then you're clueless, or you're unmarried. But, he goes on, every conversion has a secret history which the Bible reveals, and which owes its origin to God's choice. So you say to me, when did you believe in Jesus and trust in him? I believed and trusted in him, as far as I can understand it, on a Sunday afternoon, having come home from a Sunday school where I had been probably the worst boy in the class, but had figured out something of what was being said about the necessity of being a dreadful little sinner and needing a Savior.

I didn't have any problem with the first part. It was reinforced regularly for me. And I went home and I asked my father, how old do you have to be to become a Christian, to believe in Jesus? And he said, it's not about how old you are, it's about whether you understand this and this and this.

And he led me through the gospel. And then we knelt down by a chair in a room in suburban Glasgow, and I asked Jesus to forgive my sin, to come and live in my life, and make me the kind of boy he wanted me to be. That's the moment, the conscious, experiential moment in time that I based my understanding of faith upon.

But I recognized that behind that is a secret history of God, whereby he ordered all the steps of my life, leading me into that home, and into that Sunday school class, and into that moment in time, and the faithfulness of the teacher who said what she said, in order that I, hearing what she said, might come to believe in Jesus. My dear brothers, he writes, as believers. You see, until we believe, we don't have the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, living in our lives, enabling us to please God.

Until we believe, all we can do is try our jolly best. Try as best we can. We come to a section that says, don't show favorites.

So we make a note of that. We put it in our daytimer. Try this week, week of the 15th of April.

Try not to show favoritism this week. It's like hanging ornaments on. But the work of God in our lives is so to put his Spirit within us that what he calls for, he enables.

That's why he says there is a religion that is absolutely worthless. It is externalism. The religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this.

Controlled tongue, compassionate heart, uncompromised testimony, and under compassionate heart, I don't want you showing favoritism. Do you realize how uncomfortable this is? I mean, we'll come back to it. We must proceed to the end.

But our whole culture, when I say our, let's just say Western culture, because Britain has led the charge on this stuff. You can't meet snobs like you can meet in Britain. We have snobbery down to a fine art.

We have made an art form of snobbery on the basis of accent, on the basis of schooling, on the basis of money, on the basis of status. And at least a little of it has bled across the Atlantic Ocean. In fact, we live in a culture that is driven by all these things.

We come out of that culture in which we live Monday through Saturday. And it is very difficult for us not to bring that culture right into our gatherings of God's people. That's what makes it so challenging.

So, the description is, first of those who are his readers, they are believers. Believers in whom? Believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. You say, well, let's just get on.

That doesn't really matter, does it? Yes, I think it actually does. Because this little verse here is one of the most notoriously difficult verses to translate from the Greek. And if you doubt that, you should avail yourself of a King James Version.

And if you read the King James Version, and you may have it in front of you, verse one reads as follows. My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. Crystal clear, isn't it? That's one of the best arguments for a modern translation in English that you can find in the whole Bible.

Let me read it to you again. My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. The literal translation from the Greek is brothers of me, not in respect of persons, have ye the faith of the Lord of us, Jesus Christ of the glory.

What is significant is Jesus Christ tastes doxae. And more ink has been spilled in the commentaries over why it is that James puts it in this order. And I'm not about to weary you with the stuff that I've wearied myself with in the week that has gone by.

But what it causes us to do is to say, since James is a very articulate and clear communicator, since James is masterful in his use of language, he clearly hasn't slipped up at the first fence, as it were. He didn't trip over the first hurdle he came to, and in trying to express himself here in what is now the first verse of chapter two, he just couldn't really get it out, couldn't get it down the way he wanted it. We can't possibly believe that.

So we have to then assume that the reason that it is as it is, is because he wanted us to think about Jesus in relationship to glory. Lord Jesus, Jesus Christ of the glory. Those of you who are in the honors course, which is a significant group of you, in fact, I'm putting you all in the honors course as of now, but those of you who are in the honors course, your mind will be immediately jumping ahead, and it should be, because you'll be thinking, glory? Rich man.

Poor man. Rich Jesus. Poor Jesus.

Jesus in heaven. Jesus on earth. Jesus on a throne.

Jesus on a donkey. Jesus embraced in heaven. Jesus in a smelly stable.

Now, there must be some reason that he describes Jesus in this way, in terms of glory. And we'll spend the final part of our time there, and I invite you to turn just to three passages of the Bible, first in the Old Testament, in Exodus chapter 33. Exodus 33.

I think we need to do this, otherwise when we come to the imperative, don't show favoritism, we'll just be completely discombobulated. Exodus chapter 33, and Moses is asking God to make sure that his presence goes with him as he seeks to lead the people, because it will be the presence, he says, of God that will distinguish him from all the other people on the face of the earth. And in verse 18, Moses makes a request.

Now show me your glory, he says. And the Lord said, I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.

I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But you won't be able to see my face, because no one can see me and live. And then the chapter closes out with a description of the manifestation of God and his glory, passing by in a way that is anthropomorphic, to try that our finite minds might be able to capture something of this historic and incredible encounter.

But when Moses asks to see his glory, the Lord speaks in terms of his goodness and his name. You know, our church verse is from Psalm 132 or wherever, I think, you have exalted above all things your name and your word. What is so significant about that? Because the name of God doesn't simply tell us who he is, it tells us what he is.

The name of God is expressive of his attributes and of his character. If you like, the glory is shorthand for the personal presence of the Lord. Show me your glory.

May I live in your presence. May I encounter you. May I meet you.

That's what he asks. Now, we fast forward all the way through the Bible. You get to 2 Corinthians and chapter 4, which is the second passage, which is our penultimate passage.

2 Corinthians 4 and verse 6. For God, who said, let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. How do we meet God? How do we see God's glory revealed? Well, we see it revealed in Jesus. How could we possibly meet God's glory in Jesus? Because he came down to where we are.

He who was rich beyond all splendor, all for our sakes, became poor. And in coming down to where we are, Jesus was no respecter of persons. It's impossible to read the Gospels without recognizing that.

Now, again, don't make a mistake here. Jesus obviously had a particular relationship with Peter, James, and John. That's not what we're talking about.

We're not talking about friendships within the framework of friendships. In relationship to humanity, Jesus was just as prepared to call a rich man down from a tree, Zacchaeus, take him home to his house and sort him out, as he was prepared to allow a woman of ill repute to come in and weep over him, and for her tears to wash his feet, and for her hair to dry it, because he was no respecter of persons. Why? Because he was prepared to set aside the glory which was his due, which is our third passage, Philippians 2. To set aside the glory which was his due in order to come down into our existence.

And it is only when we grasp, and are grasped by the wonder and reality of that, that we will then begin to face up to the ugliness and the inconsistency of judging other people on the basis of what is external and superficial. Because, you see, the point that James is going to make is this. If God had operated on that basis with you, what kind of seat do you think you would have had? Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians.

He says, consider your calling, brethren. Not many of you were mighty. Not many of you were noble.

Not many of you were significant. Don't lose sight of the consonant, it's important. He doesn't say not any, he says not many.

And the history of the church is the history of God's moving amongst the masses, not God's moving amongst the intelligentsia or his moving amongst the rich and the famous. It isn't. It absolutely isn't.

Therefore, when a church family gets it completely upside down, when an organization gets it completely the wrong way around, and affords peculiar benefits, blessings, inroads, affections, opportunities, on the basis of the label inside the jacket, or the particular design on the outside of the plastic purse, made to look so much like leather, or the watch on the wrist, or the number plate on the car, then that church, our church, needs a solid dose of James chapter 2. My dear brothers and sisters, he says, you who are the believers in Jesus, the Lord of glory, don't whatever you do, show favoritism. It's very uncomfortable, isn't it? Well, we've only started. Therefore, there's much, much more of an uncomfortable nature that awaits us when we come back this evening and next time.

Father, thank you for the Bible. Thank you that we're not here to listen to the conjecture of a man's mind. We're not here to offer up our own ideas and notions of what needs to be.

And when we work our way through the Bible, we're stuck with the passages that we would perhaps sometimes want just to dance around, because they absolutely pin us back on our heels. We've all been in churches where people became elders and leaders, not because they were godly, but because they were wealthy, who were given positions of influence because they had a good business brain, but they didn't have a heart for God. We want you to help us with this so that we might, out of reverence and love for the Lord of glory, treat each person with respect and dignity that owes nothing to finance, education, social standing, racial profile.

Lord, we don't want our religion to be worthless here at Parkside. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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