

# Favouritism - Part 2

by Alistair Begg

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*James teaches that showing favoritism is a problem because it goes against God's character and teaching, and it can lead to exploitation and marginalization of the poor and vulnerable.*

**Duration:** 39:57

**Scripture:** Leviticus 19:11-12, Leviticus 19:14-15, James 1:1-7, James 2:1

**Topics:** "Favouritism"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on James chapter 2 and the instruction to believers not to show favoritism. He begins by emphasizing the importance of understanding the description of the readers as believers in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ. The preacher then highlights the clear and concise instruction given by James, which is to not show favoritism. He explains that James provides a practical illustration of this instruction by discussing the treatment of strangers in the church. The preacher concludes by emphasizing that James' instruction is rooted in the example and pattern of Jesus, and that our attitude and actions should reflect this.

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## Transcript

Can I invite you to turn back to the section that we were in this morning, in James chapter 1. Now, you have your Bible open, I'm sure, at James, and most of you will have it in the translation that I have, which is the New International Version, and from that we read this morning. But I'd like to reread the first seven verses, this time in J.B. Phillips' paraphrase. And so, if you care to follow along in the NIV, you'll see the way in which Phillips quite helpfully paraphrases from the original Greek.

So, James chapter 2 and verse 1. Doesn't that prove that you're making distinctions in your mind, and setting yourselves up to assess a man's quality? A very bad thing. For do notice, my brothers, that God chose poor men whose only wealth was their faith, and made them heirs to the kingdom promised to those who love him. And if you behave as I have suggested, it is the poor man that you're insulting.

Look around you. Isn't it the rich who are always trying to boss you? Isn't it the rich who drag you into litigation? Isn't it usually the rich who blaspheme the glorious name by which you are known? Amen. Just a brief prayer.

Lord, please help us now as we look at these verses. Save us from straying into bypass meadow of conjecture and invention. Keep us on the narrow path of that which is clear and challenging and necessary

for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Well, those of you who were not present this morning should know that we looked essentially at just the first verse of James chapter 2. My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. And we spent the balance of our time looking at the description which James gives to us.

First of all, of his readers, describing them as believers. And then secondly, the description that he gives us of Jesus, who is this glorious Lord Jesus Christ, or Jesus Christ of the glory. And what he tells us in this is that our attitude and our actions in relationship to the practicalities that he is about to describe are to be governed by the example and pattern of Jesus.

If we want to know how people should be accepted when they come into the community of believers, then we look at the way in which Jesus accepted other people. If we want to know how appraisals should take place of individual lives, then we need to stand back from the desires and designs that many of us instinctively have to make appraisals on the basis of that which is external and insignificant, and rather exercise discernment in the way in which Jesus did. Essentially, he is providing for us a call in everything to be like Jesus.

In the old days of hymnody, there was a song that was around, I haven't heard it in a hundred years, that had the refrain, well actually the opening lines were, earthly pleasures vainly call me, I would be like Jesus. Nothing worldly shall enthrall me, I would be like Jesus. It's in the subjunctive, you will notice.

Be like Jesus, this my song, in the home and in the throng. Be like Jesus, all day long, I would be like Jesus. So, the description that is given to us of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ stands at the very threshold of the instruction which he then provides.

And that instruction, you will notice, comes in just a phrase, don't show favoritism. It's one of those statements that we find ourselves saying, which part of this don't you understand? It is impossible for us to miss it. His instruction, and many of us as teachers might be prepared to learn from him, his instruction is clear, it is concise, it is candid, and it is quite frankly courageous.

Clear, concise, candid, and courageous. And the reason why James is able to speak with this kind of succinct clarity is because he knows himself to be on absolutely solid ground. He knows that he is not introducing here some newfangled idea, some dynamic concept that he has dreamt up to offer to his readers of this letter.

But in actual fact, he is building on the platform that exists throughout the whole of scripture. And I don't want to be tedious in doing this, and I'm not going to wait for you to turn up these passages, but I'll tell you where I am in case you choose to check and see whether what I'm telling you is actually there, or for whatever other reason. But I want to just give to you four quotes from the Bible.

First of all, in Leviticus and in chapter 19, where in a whole succession of laws and regulations which are firmly based on the Ten Commandments, the people of Israel are instructed as to how they should live in relationship to one another. And so, for example, in verse 11, do not steal, do not lie, do not deceive one another. And then in verse 12, don't swear falsely by my name, don't defraud your neighbor or rob him, don't hold back wages of a man who has been hired overnight, don't curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, don't pervert justice.

Verse 15, and then right in the middle of it all, do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. Deuteronomy, and chapter 10, and verse 12, and a little part that follows from it. And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today? And legitimately, the person may say, well, what will it look like if we obey God in this respect, if we love him, if we fear him, if we serve him with all of our hearts, if we observe all of his decrees, and so on? Well, look down at verse 17.

The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality, who accepts no bribes. What is God like? He shows no partiality. What does he do? Verse 18, he defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and he loves the alien, giving him food and clothing.

And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt. Many of the people of God, both then and now, attempted to have a very exclusivistic, exclusive notion of who my neighbor is. That was the significance of the story of the Good Samaritan.

Who is my neighbor, the person asked Jesus. You shall love your neighbor. Who's my neighbor? And then Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan.

Which turns everything upside down. But the point that we're noticing is simply that God shows no partiality. In the New Testament, in Luke chapter 20 and in verse 21, so the spies questioned him.

Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not? And Jesus, seeing through their duplicity, said to them, show me a denarius whose portrait and inscription are on it, Caesar's, they replied. And then he gave them that wonderful answer.

The reason we're turning there is because they come to him as the teacher, and they say, teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality. And finally, in one section of the Acts, in Acts chapter 10, in that memorable scene where Peter is given an illustration of God's interest in the nations at the house of Cornelius, verse 34. Then Peter began to speak.

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You see, he knew that it was true that God does not show favoritism. He was Jewish.

He understood the Jewish law. He knew Leviticus. He knew Deuteronomy.

He understood all of that. But nevertheless, his approach to people was not what it needed to be, because he was partial, and he was concerned to display justice and kindness, but in a very exclusive framework. And God had to wean him away from that, just in the same way that God has to wean many of us away from our own perspective in relationship to the things that James confronts us with here.

So, the description then is given of the readers as believers, of the Lord Jesus as glorious, and then the instruction, which is clear and concise, is backed up by the rest of the Bible, don't show favoritism. And then James, as a wonderful teacher, does what every teacher ought to do, and that is open a window of understanding on this concise statement. Let me, he says, work this out for you in a way that is homely, in an illustration that is down to earth.

Let me give you something that you will all be able to understand. And we dipped into this this morning, and we come back to it just briefly this evening. Here are two strangers, it would appear, who come into the gathering of God's people, whatever the context might be.

If they weren't strangers, then they presumably would know where to go and sit. But it is a difficult thing to go into a place that you don't know. I certainly don't find it easy.

And it often isn't easy to go into a church. It ought to be a lot easier than it is, but many times it's not. And unless somebody is kind and gracious to us and reaches out and realizes that we're fairly clueless and we don't know where we are or where we're going or what to do, then we'll be left just to amble around until finally we drop into a seat.

Of course, if we make the mistake of sitting in some hallowed seat that is known only as Mrs. Jenkins' seat, then someone will, of course, come, if it isn't Mrs. Jenkins herself, and ask for us to be removed to a more suitable seat for ourselves. A suitable seat being any seat other than Mrs. Jenkins' seat. Incidentally, I'm not sure that we have a Mrs. Jenkins in the church.

And if we do, please let her know that I had no notion of it and just invented the name from nowhere. But the strangers come in. The strangers come in, and one is given a good seat.

That came out quite clearly, didn't it? In the paraphrase by Phillips, the good seat is granted to the man of substance. He's shown special attention. He's wearing fine clothes, and he wears a gold ring.

In other words, he just has the elements that identify him as somebody who has made it, somebody who is well off, somebody who perhaps will be able to make a contribution. And if the people are thinking in those terms, then here they go. Let's make sure that this individual gets a very nice seat.

And the other stranger, of course, is a poor man, and he's in shabby clothes, and for him there is no significant seat at all. In fact, there may be no seat at all for the individual of meager means. That's the simple illustration.

Two folks come into the gathering. One looks like he's got a few dollars in his pocket, and immediately somebody says, let me try and get you a very nice place to sit. And the other fellow is a bit of a mess, and someone says, well, just try and find somewhere.

And if you don't find a seat, just sit on the floor. Now, there's something that we need to know here, and it's very important. The context of first century Judaism, first century Greek and Roman culture, knew virtually nothing of a middle class.

It wasn't at all like this gathering this evening. It wasn't America. It couldn't be, of course.

But when we read this from the perspective of our culture, of our society, it's hard for us to envisage exactly what was described here, because the context was largely that of significant poverty with a few people who were exceptionally rich. Instead of there being sort of a great middle class, it was much more like places in Mexico that I've been, or places in Africa that you may have visited, other places in the world, where without the benefits that we enjoy for advancement and so on, there just is a phenomenal disparity between the shabby and the chic. And there is, if you like, no shabby chic.

It takes a culture like this to develop shabby chic, to make lousy looking clothes phenomenally expensive, so that significantly rich people can show how significantly rich they are by wearing these phenomenally shabby clothes that testify to the expense involved in making them shabby. Now, we are quite a unique society. There is no question of that.

And therefore, it's important for us to remember that this is an historic context. This is a realistic situation that James is addressing. But in actual fact, the application to our environment is not too difficult to make.

Certainly, as I mentioned England this morning, and I haven't had the backlash from that yet, I thought about it afterwards that our service is streamed on the internet now, and I really have to be far more cautious about things than I've been. Everything is taken down to be used in evidence against me. But you don't have to go too far back in the culture of Anglicanism.

That is the Anglican church, what you refer to or we refer to as the Episcopal church over here. You don't have to go too far back in Anglicanism in the British Isles to find the situation where the wealthy in a parish paid an annual rent so as to secure a well-placed seat in the church. That seat or that pew often came with its own door and with its own key so as to prevent anybody from sitting in Mrs. Jenkins pew.

After all, the rich who had secured their riches by whatever means were entitled, so it was thought, to that kind of thing. Those who were not wealthy, those for whom finances were insufficient, had to content themselves with finding a spot in the open seating. In fact, the seating was identified in the parish churches as free seating.

So, you can imagine a situation where a couple of people come to visit in the local parish church and one of them goes to go into one of these pews and somebody taps him on the shoulder and says, excuse me, no, no, no, no, these are the reserved pews. This is the special, you'll notice this is Mrs. Jenkins pew. She's been here for a number of years and please, if you just go look over there in that dusty corner, you'll probably be able to get something over in the free seating over there.

Yeah, it's not very nice, but that's exactly how it would be. Or you say, well, we're a long way from there, far away from England and far away from that time. You won't run into anything like that over here in America.

Oh, will you not? Will you not? Why, have you been walking around with your eyes closed? Some of us actually think we own the pew that we sit in every single Sunday. Some of you would like to have a door on the end of your pew. In fact, the depth of your depravity is coming out in that, as I describe this situation, you say, now that's the kind of thing that we ought to adopt here at Parkside Church.

Well, we may not have seen that, but I think most of us have seen the appointment of leadership in churches, not on account of wisdom, but on account of wealth. It seems so patently obvious. Now, this man is now in a position of leadership and one can think of no real reason for it at all, apart from the fact that somebody must have decided that he had a significant amount of cash and presumably that would be useful in the process.

You see, money still does the talking far too loudly in Christian circles. Money still talks and talks very loudly in Christian circles. And where it does and when it does, the glory of Christ will eventually depart.

It will. The description, the illustration, and then he makes application of it. Verse five.

And I won't take long on this. Listen, he says, my dear brothers, listen. And then he makes application of his illustration by means of three rhetorical questions.

Let me point them out to you without belaboring them at all. Question number one, he says, hasn't God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith? He says, I want you to listen and I want you to think about this. It's very, very important.

Question number one, hasn't God chosen those who are poor in the world, in the eyes of the world, to be rich in faith? And of course, the answer to that rhetorical question is so clearly yes. We thought this morning about Paul's words in first Corinthians one, and we might equally well have gone to Mary's song in Luke chapter one. As she sings of Jesus, the Messiah, he has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. And there in the Magnificat, we find the answer to the first of these rhetorical questions. Hasn't God chosen those who are poor in the world, in the eyes of the world? Now, we need to think this out because it would appear extremely likely that James here is taking a leaf again from the teaching style of Jesus, his brother.

I'm grateful to Mattia again, my favorite Old Testament scholar, for so much of this insight. Let me just make this clear to you. Luke chapter 14, don't look it up.

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus and turning to them, he said, if anyone comes to me and doesn't hate his father and his mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and his sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. What? If anyone comes to me and doesn't hate his dad, hate his mom, hate his wife, hate his kids, hate his brothers and his sisters, hate himself, then he can't be my disciple. What did Jesus say? Is he really teaching there that we're supposed to hate our parents? No.

That we're supposed to hate ourselves? No. Or our siblings? No. What is he doing? He's employing a device in order to make a very strong point, isn't he? He's making it clear that devotion to him, Jesus as Lord, is of necessity in a class of its own.

In fact, devotion to Jesus is to be so striking and so stirring that devotion to anyone else will appear almost like hatred by way of comparison. So, in other words, in some situations where two sides of a truth exist, but one side outweighs the other, far outclasses the other, it merits stating it as if that was the only truth. In other words, we know from reading our Bibles that what James is saying here is generally true.

It is not invariably true. Therefore, he is employing a device, a rhetorical device, a teaching device, and a device that Jesus himself used as his brother. Because when he says, isn't it the case that God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith? The answer is yes and no.

It's yes generally, but not invariably. Because he chose Abraham, rich. Job, rich.

Zacchaeus, rich. Levi, rich. Sergius Paulus, the proconsul, rich.

Joseph of Arimathea, rich. So, you see what he's doing. He's pressing and driving home a point by taking one side of it and stating it in a way that makes it so compelling in its impact.

Because, as again we saw in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, Paul is able to say, not many of you were rich. The vast majority of society was poor. There were some who were rich.

There was no middle class. And so, when a church assembly replicated society, it was inevitable that the preponderance of the assembly would be poor and a few would be rich. Second question, isn't it the rich who are exploiting you and dragging you into court? And the answer to that again is, this is generally the case, but not invariably so.

James is not for a moment suggesting that the only litigation that was taking place, that the only animosity that was expressed, was an animosity that came from people who were wealthy. But what he is pointing out is, and it is true in our culture, that it is only people who have access to finance who will be able to litigate things. That is why the poor and the downtrodden need public defenders.

That is why they need people within our culture who will be able to stand up and represent them, even though they do not have the finances themselves to go out and hire their own attorney in order to protect their own interests. And so, when he asks the question, again, it is generally so. And of course, this isn't theoretical.

It's intensely practical. And we won't be tedious and go through the Acts of the Apostles, but we recognize that that is exactly what we find in Acts, that where wealth is on the side of power, power and wealth combine to grind the poor into the dust. And the temptation is always, always for those in the position of power, wealth and influence to treat in a disparaging way those who do not have the wherewithal to defend themselves.

And so many of these Christian people were on the receiving end of that thing. Now, you see, of course, what he is doing here. He is going to make the point in conclusion.

If you know this to be true, how in the wide world can you treat poor people like this when they come into your church? If you know that's the case, if you know what God has done in relationship to the poor, and if you know what the rich have done in relationship to abuse and to litigation, and third rhetorical question and final rhetorical question, aren't they the ones who slander the noble name of him to whom you belong? Aren't they the blasphemers, the taking of a name? And you see this in the Old Testament, for example, in the account of Jacob, I think it is. Now I just have to look this up for myself. You can wait.

Yeah. Then he blessed Joseph and said, this is Jacob, made a God before whom my father's Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has delivered me from all harm. May he bless these boys.

Now, listen, may they be called by my name and the names of my father's Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly upon the earth. You see, to be brought under the auspices or the influence of a name was to describe a relationship which was both permanent and personal and intimate. And James is saying to these believers to whom he writes, God has brought you under the auspices, if you like, of his name.

Remember in Chronicles, if my people who are called by my name, they were first called Christians in Antioch. And he says, think about it. Isn't it the true that God has largely taken those who are poor in the eyes of world and made them rich in faith? And this is the year of the real riches.

And are these rich people and wealthy people, not the ones who are involved in abuse and litigation? And are they not the ones who feel free to blaspheme the noble name under which you march, the banner under which you move? Bottom line, he says in verse six, you have insulted the poor. You have insulted

the poor. And how have they done so? By treating them in a disparaging manner, causing harm to them, to those upon whom God has set his love, those to whom you will notice he has promised his kingdom, verse five.

And for the readers of this letter to even approximate to what James describes in the illustration is to find themselves on the wrong side of the equation. Now, enough. We must stop the challenge in this.

And we're not anywhere close to the center of the chapter yet. But the challenge in this section is unavoidable, isn't it? We said that already today. And the correction to our misplaced affection, to our misguided thinking, to our insulting behavior is to, number one, consider how Jesus came from a position of unassailable wealth and glory and moved graciously, kindly, quickly and consistently reaching out to the poorest and the lowest.

To consider also the basis upon which God chose to save those to whom James writes. He didn't set his love upon you. He writes in Deuteronomy 7 because you were the most significant group, because you were the largest group.

He set his love upon you because he loved you. In fact, he came and redeemed you from Egypt when you were, frankly, just a bunch of slaves. He came and redeemed the slaves out of Egypt.

He didn't come and redeem the intelligentsia. He didn't come and redeem the ruling class. He came and redeemed those with broken backs and bloodied brows and hands that were worn by the responsibilities given to them by their captors.

So, the correction is to be found in considering the coming of Jesus and his approach to the poor, the approach of God in his choice, in verse 5, and in consideration of true wealth and what it means to be his heirs. He has chosen us to inherit the kingdom, a kingdom that he's promised to those who love him. If we're kids of the kingdom, we're supposed to act like the king.

And the king took off his crown and didn't show any airs and graces and didn't hang around just with a certain group who fit his framework. It's very challenging. I finished with a quote from an old hymn that was in my mind when I wrapped this up for two reasons.

And this song goes like this. Some of you who are old like me will remember it. We don't sing these songs anymore.

I'm not sure whether that's good or bad at the moment. Please don't write to me about that. If you think it's good, I think it's good as well.

If you think it's bad, I think it's bad as well. I just don't have time for those kind of debates in my own mind. Down from his glory, ever living story, my God and Savior came and Jesus was his name, born in a manger to his own a stranger, a man of sorrows, tears and agony.

And the refrain goes, oh, how I love them, how I adore him and so on. And one of the following stanzas contains the phrase, what condescension, what condescension. And this I'm going to give you as the final reason why this was in my mind.

Because when I was a student, I was for a time singing in a male voice choir. I shouldn't have been anywhere within 100 yards of it, but I went because it was a lot of fun when we weren't singing and our

choir and our choir, and especially for those who were listening. But it was our choir comprised.

It was an international gathering. And we had on this trip to Scotland, which we'd taken from London, a little man in our choir whose name was Miguel, who came from a South American country. He had the biggest suitcase known to man.

In fact, diagonally, I think he could have put himself in it. And as far as I know, he did in order to get himself shipped back to South America. But anyway, in order to create the international flavor of things, the choir master had Miguel sing a significant part of this song.

Down from his glory, I won't try and mimic him. And of course, against the run of play, when it came to the line, what condescension, Miguel sang, what condensation. And tore up the entire choir who was standing beside him.

And we all just burst out laughing in the middle of his song, and he had no clue what was going on. And I'd never forgotten him standing up there, about five foot three, singing, what condensation. And I'm thankful for that, because it helps me always to remember what he should have sang, which was what condescension, that Christ would condescend to come down here.

And when I think of that, it condemns me at every point when I'm tempted to ride my high horse. Maybe you feel that way too. Father, thank you that the Word of God is alive and so relevant to us as we try and work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.

Help us not to get this wrong. Help us not to make misguided applications based on our own preferences. Help us not to create little escape hatches for ourselves that we can slide down and away.

Help us to stand face on to the full impact of your truth, both as individuals and as families, and certainly as a church family. Lord, forgive us for everyone whom we have wittingly or unwittingly offered a bad seat or no seat, metaphorically, if not literally. Those who have been turned away by the absence of our condescension, by the absence of humility, by the presence of values which owe more to our contemporary society than they owe to the convicting truth of the Bible.

And help us as we go forward so that we can get it right, so that we might do better, so that we might increasingly become the kind of place where all who enter will be welcomed in the way that Jesus welcomed those among whom he moved. Irrespective of social status, resources, intellect, help us, Lord, we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.

That concludes this message. Thanks for listening to Truth For Life. If you'd like information on ordering additional messages from Alistair Begg and Truth For Life, then call our resource line at 1-888-58-TRUTH, write to us at Post Office Box 39-8000, Cleveland, Ohio 44139, or visit us online at [truthforlife.org](http://truthforlife.org). Truth For Life, where the learning is for living.

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