

Favouritism – the good and the bad

James 2:1-13

I have a dream today, I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. When we let freedom ring, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

That speech was given in a different time, but as I listen to the news of the fighting between Israel and Palestine, what's happening in the Ukraine and too many other parts of the world, it is still a dream that needs to be held out there before us. And it is very relevant as we come up to James 2.

James chapter 2 starts off...

My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favour some people over others? (James 2:1)

We have been looking at James over recent weeks. James is an immensely practical book and here at the beginning of Chapter 2 he makes quite a big statement – don't show favouritism.

It's all very well making that kind of statement, it's a nice statement but let's face it, some people are just annoying, do we have to like everyone equally? Obviously we are not going to get on with everyone and I don't think the bible expects that of us...*but what James is on about is faith in action and how our faith and our actions should be consistent with each other. If we have faith, it should be clear and visible in the way we live.*

You may remember in chapter one, James is dealing with the Christian and trials, that trials are going to be part of following Jesus, that our faith will grow and mature because of them. Last week James in the end of chapter one he emphasised that we need to know the word but that is no good on its own, we need to do the word also. Remember the pedalling illustration, know the word, do the word.

In other words, he says, if you claim to be a Christian, and yet do not show practical, tangible love to those who are in need, to those who are most vulnerable, because it's easy for you to turn a blind eye, it doesn't speak well for your claims of being a Christ-follower.

And now when we get to James chapter two, James starts to get specific with examples.

Specifically, today's passage teaches us that the Christian faith is utterly incompatible with personal favouritism. It teaches that Jesus' great commandment to love God and love our neighbours is incompatible with prejudice.

Simply put, God does not pick favourites, and if we do, we are denying God's way.

If you think about that, that is a big statement with huge consequences, if you show favouritism you are denying your faith!

If someone wanted to deny their faith, how would you expect then to do it? Most would say that they would have to make some sort of big public renouncement of Jesus? James says no, you can do it a little bit at a time, in a clear and visible way.

James 2:1-13

My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favour some people over others?

² For example, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewellery, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in dirty clothes.³ If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, "You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor"—well, ⁴ doesn't this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives?

⁵ Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters. Hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones who will inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you dishonour the poor! Isn't it the rich who oppress you and drag you into court? ⁷ Aren't they the ones who slander Jesus Christ, whose noble name you bear?

⁸ Yes indeed, it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: "Love your neighbour as yourself." ⁹ But if you favour some people over others, you are committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law.

¹⁰ For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God's laws. ¹¹ For the same God who said, "You must not commit adultery," also said, "You must not murder." So if you murder someone but do not commit adultery, you have still broken the law.

¹² So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free. ¹³ There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you.

This passage has troubled me. Favouritism? We all do it to some extent. It is instinctive. In some ways it is part of our human nature to show favouritism, to favour those who are like us or those who like us. If we stop think about it, it is at the core of racism. It is at the heart of most of the disputes in our world today. Israel and Palestine for example.

James uses several terms for this in the passage in order to indicate what kind of behaviour he's talking about.

- In verse one, for example, he speaks of personal favouritism, or, if you're using an older translation, it may say *respecter of persons*.
- In verse three, he speaks about paying special attention to some while ignoring others. In verse four, he talks about making discriminations. In verse nine, he back to showing favour.
- And in verse thirteen he elaborates to show how people extend or refuse to extend mercy.

So God is saying here that all people are in all ways equal in his eyes...and so this text tells us that we should not discriminate in any way....right?

Yes and No!

Well, in truth the answer is absolutely yes, and also, in some important ways, no. There is Good and bad discrimination.

Absolutely yes because that is how God sees us. Jesus came and died for you and me and every other person who has ever lived, lives now, or ever shall live.

He came for Jews, Gentiles, Israel and Palestine and everyone in-between. His love for us is unconditional and universal. He wants everyone to be saved.

- We are all his children, no matter how awful, annoying, rude, smelly, offensive, violent and destructive we are to ourselves and those around us.
- We are all equally bad in God's eyes, and yet we are all his most precious jewel. We are all loved by God.

- So no matter what you think, God does not love you more, or less, than the addict sleeping rough under a bridge, or the business woman who was just hired as the CEO of a multi-billion dollar corporation.

We are all his children, he loves us all....**but** we are all different,and God is **not** telling us we should **never** discriminate.

Granted, to today's ears, discrimination is a bad word, and because of its association with racism, sexism, homophobia, and other type of social intolerance and hatred, it should be a bad word. A badge of shame for those who claim to be follower of Jesus.

But there is an appropriate and loving type of discrimination that is essential to being truly kind and loving.

For example,

- to offer a seat to the 90 year old with a cane is *discriminating* against the able bodied teenager who got there first, but the offer of the seat is done from a place of compassion or love.
- if a family is short on money at Christmas time, we would more likely give to the children first....adults expecting gifts would be discriminated against.
- in an emergency if food was limited, it would go to the sick and injured first.
- we also make distinctions in regards to pregnant woman and people with disabilities. (Although I must confess to have occasionally mumbled annoyance as I drive around a full car park when there are 5 or 6 empty disability car parks!)
- We even discriminate in a loving way when we offer help. Sometimes giving money to a person is not be helpful to them, it can make their situation worse. Sometimes tough love requires us to make hard choices. For example, would helping a negligent son or daughter out of yet another mess, really help them?

So we are meant to discriminate or discern or judge... but what James is talking about is making inappropriate distinctions.

He is condemning **self-serving discrimination** that is based upon shallow external factors. When you make judgments that have no merit in love or kindness but are rooted in what James calls **evil motives**.

So James challenges us and gives us three fundamental reasons why Christians must not show favouritism.

1. To discriminate is to judge with evil motives (James 2:4).

⁴ doesn't this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives?

If you look at a bit of church history, it's all a bit embarrassing. Only a few hundred years ago (and up to 1970) the Church of England regulated where you sat in Church. It was based on your social status and your income. Wealthy families rented a pew. The more you paid the closer to the front you could sit. Poorer families sat nearer the back or could stand.

As we celebrate 200 years of the gospel I have been reading around how the settlers and Missionaries, treated Maori in NZ, some of it, not all, is pretty embarrassing. The treaty of Waitangi was prepared and the whole purpose was that there would be no favouritism, that we are one people. Unfortunately we failed in the implementation of that, but that was the purpose.

I have also been doing a bit of reading around the present conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. What a mess! And I must admit that we Christians need to be very careful that we don't show unjust favouritism. Favouritism (mainly based on ignorance) just feeds the fire. This whole conflict is not an easy issue at all, very complex. This week I got a phone call about a march for Israel. I didn't feel I could advertise or support one against the other. I am finding it very difficult to see on either side evidence of good motives. If it was a march for peace I would be there. In my reading I am not convinced that God is on one side and not the other, I know some of you will object to that comment and I am happy to discuss that if you wish.

To discriminate on the basis of race, on the basis of intelligence, on the basis of wealth, or of age or colour or creed **and can I stir the pot a bit more and add sexuality**, says James, is evil.

2. To discriminate is to dishonour the poor and slander Jesus. (James 2:5-7).

⁵ Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters. Hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones who will inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you dishonour the poor! Isn't it the rich who oppress you and drag you into court? ⁷ Aren't they the ones who slander Jesus Christ, whose noble name you bear?

Typically it is the more powerful who face the temptation to exploit others. And since power and wealth usually go together, it is the poor who are the most vulnerable. I guess this is where I have a few issues with Israel's latest response.

This is also why a lot of Christian Aid today is focusing in on Trade Justice at the moment. It is why we are encouraged to purchase fair trade goods from the Developing World. James says to discriminate against the poor is to slander, or insult, Jesus, because He died for them also.

And James gives us still a third reason to avoid favouritism.

3. To show favouritism is to face judgement (James 2:10-13)

¹⁰ For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God's laws. ¹¹ For the same God who said, "You must not commit adultery," also said, "You must not murder." So if you murder someone but do not commit adultery, you have still broken the law.

¹² So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free. ¹³ There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you.

Last year I got pulled over by a policeman. Coming down the Bombay hills and taking the turn off to Tauranga I was told I was doing 104 but that was in the place where the speed is reduced to 90. He asked have you had a recent speeding ticket, I said not for a long time. He went to check, found I was telling the truth and I got let off with a warning. Thankfully I had a good driving record. How many speeding tickets does it take to ruin a perfect driving record? Just one. You can follow the speed limit your entire life, stop at every stop sign, and signal each time you change lanes, but the one time you drive too fast because you were running late or whatever, you get pulled over. The officer writes you a ticket, tears it off, and hands it to you. Your perfect record is now marred! Never again can you say, I have a clean driving licence.

James asks us a similar kind of question. How many biblical laws must you break in order to be called a lawbreaker? His answer is clear. Just one! It can be a big law, like "You shall not murder", or it can be a simple act of favouritism. But when we break the law of God, we become a lawbreaker.

How do we avoid showing favouritism?

James says it very simply **Obey the royal law**

⁸ Yes indeed, it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (James 2:8).

If we truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, we will obey His every Word and act as he acted. Which is again James whole theme, know the word, do the word

And remember we are Accountable

¹² So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free. (James 2:12)

Communion – a time of confession

I have a dream today.

I have a dream of OBC becoming a family of every age, every race, every colour, living like Jesus, Loving without measure without favouritism, learning our faith, knowing what our faith means, and leading to make a difference.

Let's pray.