

# FAITH THAT WORKS

## 3. FAVOURITISM. JAMES 2:1-13

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

### Introduction.

I'm sure some of you at least have watched the musical, *My Fair Lady*. Some of you, like me, have probably studied the play, *Pygmalion*, by George Bernard Shaw, on which the musical is based. I think I had to study it for English Literature O-Level.

It is the story of how a professor, Henry Higgins, decides to turn a flower-girl into a duchess. Teach her how to speak differently, teach her some upper-class manners, and the job can be done. Henry Higgins comes across as a fairly frank, unkind man. He is contrasted with Colonel Pickering, who is much of a gentleman.

Towards the end of the play, Higgins and Eliza Doolittle, the flowergirl, have had a row. She has walked out on him. There is a scene where they talk about whether she should go back to him. Higgins says,

If you come back I shall treat you just as I have always treated you. I can't change my nature; and I don't intend to change my manners. My manners are exactly the same as Colonel Pickering's.

LIZA. That's not true. He treats a flower girl as if she was a duchess.

HIGGINS. And I treat a duchess as if she was a flower girl.

And that takes us nicely into James 2. James' basic concern for the people he is writing to is that the faith that they profess as believers in the Lord Jesus makes an actual difference in their lives. The particular issue on his mind at this point in the letter is their treatment of other people. He is concerned about the temptation to treat people differently, based on the wrong things. He is concerned about the sin of favouritism.

Favouritism is sinful judgmentalism.

We start by looking at how James describes and illustrates favouritism. Look again at the first four verses of the chapter.

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

The word he uses literally means "receiving the face." You are making a decision on how to treat a person based on their external appearance. Straight away James says that it is wrong; it does not go along with faith in the Lord Jesus. The two don't mix.

To bring the point home, he describes a situation that could happen in the life of their church. It had not necessarily happened yet, but attitudes were such that it could easily happen. It is probably best to understand the scenario he describes as something which happens in a worship service. The two people who come in could be visitors or new converts. They are obviously different. Their appearance is different. One is wealthy and it is obvious from his appearance. The reference to the gold ring does not mean that Christian men should not wear gold rings (that is a view that some have taken); this man's gold ring was a sign that he belonged to the upper classes. The point is that everything about him proclaimed wealth. Everything about the other man proclaimed poverty. He was badly dressed. His clothes were dirty, and perhaps even smelly.

One man is shown to the best seat; the other can stand or sit on the floor. One man is important; the other man has little value. When Christians behave in this way - it is true for churches as it is for individual attitudes - they have become "judges with evil thoughts." We sit in judgment on people: who is important and who is not.

I think there are two things at work in this and I want to camp out on them for a moment.

### **1. The favouritism that James is talking about treats people differently, based on their wealth or social standing.**

Favouritism has different applications, and we will get to some of them in a moment, but the specific manifestation of it has to do with rich and poor; it has to do with people with status and people with none.

It is not the first time James has talked about rich and poor in his letter, and it will not be the last. In chapter 1 he encouraged the poor to boast in their exalted circumstances - as Christians, they are heirs of the kingdom, and he encouraged the rich to humble themselves.

Someone's wealth or social standing is no measure of their value as a person. The lack of wealth or the lack of social standing is no measure of a person's value either. The people that James is writing to are tempted to behave as though this was not true. They are tempted to behave as though these things really do determine how valuable a person is.

### **2. Favouritism makes a judgment on a person's value based on the wrong thing.**

This is the wider principle that sits behind the specific issue of treating people differently based on whether they are wealthy or not. You may well have a ranking order, but doesn't necessarily have to do with money. Think for a moment about the ways you might rank people - or the ways in which you think people tend to rank you.

- What about fame or achievement? If you discovered that the person sitting beside you is an international sports player, would you treat them differently? Max Lucado tells a story about what happened one Sunday in his church when a professional basketball player turned up at one service and a homeless man turned up at the second. The men met a very different response from the worshippers.

- What about popularity? This may be more relevant to younger people. There is a sense in which younger people - certainly children - are less aware of the kinds of issues that cause discrimination among adults; but they know that there is a quality of “cool” that makes a person popular or not. This may have less to do with where someone has to sit in a worship service, but it is relevant to the way you treat a new member of your youth group in church; or it is relevant to the way you treat a new pupil in your class. You are not judging them on how rich their parents are, but you have a scale of cool and the higher the person is on the scale, the more attention you pay to them.
- What about education or intelligence? Some of us find it easier to be drawn to people higher up this scale than to others. We like to talk about ideas. We feel important when we think we are having high level conversations.
- Then there is race. I remember Pauline and I taking a youth fellowship in a church in County Down. It was over twenty years ago and it was a Sunday evening. At the time we were both involved in a missions’ organisation that was involved in church planting in Europe and in short term summer evangelism teams. We were at this meeting to talk about mission in Europe. We had a quiz to get people thinking about some of the countries the organisation was working in. We had a Smart Alec in the group and when we came to the question, “What is the population of the Republic of Ireland?” he answered “too many.” I suspect that things have changed, for the most part, in the past twenty years, but how do you do with the Polish person who sells you your newspaper? What about the Pakistani you meet cleaning the toilets as you make your way through a British airport over the summer? I realise that we are pushing out into another subject at this point, but some of the principles are the same.
- As a further example, I think there is a general scale of “usefulness”. What I mean by that is that we can relate differently to people depending on how useful we think the relationship will be to us. What are we going to get out of it? Will this person make me feel better about myself? Is it a bright and bubbly personality that it is easy to be around? Or is it one of those people we write off as hard work?

These are all examples of ways in which we judge the value of a person based on the wrong thing. “Show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Favouritism is a denial of God’s work in the gospel.

James goes on to talk about why it is wrong to favour the wealthy over the poor. Look at verses 5 to 7.

Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

Notice three things.

1. God has placed value on the poor by making them heirs of the kingdom.
2. The rich are dragging members of the church (presumably poorer members) to court.
3. The rich are blaspheming the name by which the Christians are called: they speak badly of Christ.

If God blesses the poor, then it is wrong for his people to despise them. If the rich are treating the Christians so badly, then it makes no sense to try to favour them. (This has nothing to do with forgiving enemies or persecutors; it has to do with bowing and scraping before people which does no one any good.) And if the rich are blaspheming the name of Jesus, it makes no sense to give them preferential treatment if they turn up in church.

There is certain appeal to logic in the second and third of those examples, but I think the first point James makes is more fundamental. He is accusing his readers of valuing people differently from the way God values them. They dishonour the poor by telling them to stand at the back or sit at their feet; God has honoured them by choosing them to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.

God has always wanted his people to take care about the way they treat the poor among them. You can read some of the OT laws that provided for a brother who fell into need. Think of the provisions of the harvest laws whereby a farmer could not go back to pick up the pieces he had left behind. They were for people in material need. There is a blessing for the generous who share their bread with the poor. The Bible talks of God himself delighting to lift up the poor. Perhaps there was a sense in which the poor were more aware of their utter dependence on God and were more receptive to his grace.

That is actually one of the problems about wealth. Jesus warned that it is not easy for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Wealth too easily becomes a rival god. He does not close the door to wealthy people; it's just that the door is narrow and too much encumbrance gets in the way.

Being a wealthy Christian is a difficult and challenging thing.

When it comes to the Kingdom of God, God likes to operate on the principle of reversals. He likes to turn our value scales upside down. So the poor, who would be discounted and left behind, find that they are welcomed into the kingdom. At least God welcomes them; this passage is a call to the rest of his people to follow him.

You get other examples of this in 1 Corinthians when Paul talks about how there are relatively few of the great and the wise who respond to the gospel.

One of the key things about our relationships in church is that we need to treat people the way God has treated them in the gospel. We could talk about the fact that we have all been created by God in his image: we have that in common, whether we are rich or poor. But it gets more specific when we talk about the way God treats us in the gospel. God has poor people, making them rich through the gospel; how can we dishonour anyone that he has chosen to bless in this way.

After this message we are going to sing a modern hymn, *Beneath the Cross of Jesus*. The first verse of it talks about how people stand individually beneath the cross of Jesus. It talks about our unworthy souls. We receive mercy that we don't deserve. Hands that could turn us away hold wounds that tell us to come. The second verse talks about the other people we see around the cross. It talks about the family of God who are gathered round the cross. It says this:

How could I now dishonour the ones that you have loved.

Favouritism among Christians, where we treat people according to our scales of value, is a denial of the gospel. What my bigoted friend in County Down did not realise was that same mercy that he needed from the gospel was also available to the people for whom he seemed to have so little time.

In the era of discount airlines, we are less used to the different classes of travel. But if you have flown on an intercontinental flight, you know about how the class system works. Some people pay more than others, and they are entitled to better facilities. More comfortable seats; more room to stretch out their legs; a better quality of food. "Board at your convenience." You know the thoughts that cross your mind as you pass through the comfort of the upper classes and make your way to the cramped conditions in seat 43D. But the curtain is pulled and you are not even allowed to see who is in there.

In the gospel, there is no economy class. Anyone God brings in is as entitled to be there as you are.

We will be taking communion at the end of our service. One of the things communion does is remind us of the truth of these relationships we have through the gospel. I know that for practical reasons and health reasons, we have our little pre-cut pieces of bread and our tiny individual cups. But in a way it is a pity because we lose some of the horizontal implications of taking bread and

wine. One loaf does not just speak of the body of the Lord Jesus that was given on the cross; it also speaks of the one body, the church.

Sharing communion should help to guard us against favouritism. Because favouritism is a denial of God's work in the gospel.

Favouritism is a failure to love your neighbour.

Finally look at verses 8 to 13.

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Favouritism breaks God's law.

James sets it against the commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves. If we do that, we do well. If we show partiality, we stand convicted as law-breakers.

When you love your neighbour as you love yourself, you accept him for who he is, not on the basis of some ranking system you have established.

Douglas Moo has written this in his commentary:

Love for the neighbor, extended by Jesus to all people, including those different from us ... requires that poor, shabbily dressed people be given as much respect and attention as the well-dressed and prominent.

...

In obedience to their king, Jesus, Christians are to build among themselves a genuine counterculture, in which the values of the kingdom of God rather than the values of this world are lived out.

And lest we think that just because we keep other parts of the law we must therefore be doing fine, he makes the point that the law is a unity. There may be several different commandments, but they come from one Lawgiver. If you keep most of it, but offend one part of it, you have offended the Lawgiver and he will hold you accountable.

When he judges you, you will depend on his mercy. Make sure you live as a person of mercy.

You probably remember the story Jesus told about the man who owed a huge debt. His master showed him mercy and forgave him the debt. Once he had been released from his debt, he found a servant who owed him a relatively small amount. He threw him in prison until he would pay. When the master heard about it, he was angry and decided to call in the man's debt after all.

The man demonstrated that he knew nothing about mercy. He had been glad to grab its benefits, but had been unwilling to let it change him. Judgement without mercy is shown to one who has shown no mercy.

Favouritism is failure to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

Conclusion.

Eugene A. Maddox, of Palatka, Florida, writes:

When I was a child and teenager, my mother and I almost always ate dinner at cafeterias. On occasion we would be invited to dinner at her friend and employer's home. These were always wonderful times for me because there the meals were homemade, and these precious people treated me like family.

In 1970, when I was about 15, we and some other guests were invited there to dinner. I recall these other two guests being very kind women: an elderly, somewhat crippled lady and her personal assistant, an African-American lady named Addie.

When it was time for dinner, the long table was filled with food. We said grace and began to indulge. About halfway through the meal, I noticed someone was missing. It was Addie. I did not think much of it at the time; I assumed she was not feeling well.

On the way home that night I asked my mom what had happened to Addie. My mother told me to call her "Miss Addie," and then told me what had happened. Her answer shocked me. Our hostess's sister, who had cooked our meal, had grown up with the tradition that black and white people did not eat together at the same table. And so Miss Addie had been told to eat by herself in a separate room.

Neither my mother nor I could believe this had happened in this home that we had come to love and respect, and we both hurt for Miss Addie. We felt dirty because we too had been a part of that meal.

Three days later when I came home from school I got another shock. Mom was cooking a meal at home. This only happened once every year or two. Equally amazing to me, she was not making her beef stew. Beef stew was the only thing I knew mom could make. But tonight she was making a roast, and our dining room table was set as fancy as I had ever seen.

I asked, "Mom, what's going on?"

She replied, "I have invited Miss Addie for dinner."

That night was the most wonderful dinner I ever had with my mother, and Miss Addie was a congenial guest, who even brought us a set of guest towels for a gift. No Christmas or birthday present my mother ever gave me will compare to that night. As she sat at that table, she was 100 feet tall in my eyes. Three years later she died, but the memory of that night lives on within me. Though I did not recognize it at the time, my mother had given me a living picture of grace, of God's heart, and his great table.