

Rejecting Favouritism

James 2:1-13

Do you have a favourite in your family?

Maybe you have a favourite child, a favourite grandchild,
a favourite parent, a favourite grandparent.

Maybe after hearing this question you're thinking to yourself

"oh no! we don't play favourites in our house!, everyone is treated the same!"

Well, if that *is* true, science would say that you're an exception to the rule!

In a recent study published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*

researchers discovered that Mums spent more money on their daughters
while Dads spent more money on their sons.

In the experiment, parents were given a chance
to win a back-to-school pack for one of their children.

75% of mothers decided to enter the draw on behalf of a daughter,
while 87% of dads entered on behalf of their sons.

This experiment was repeated in both the US and in India with very similar results.

Provided you have two children of different genders,
then the chances are you will favour one over the other,
and perhaps dads are little more prone to this than the mums.

Isn't that terrible! It's terrible! It's completely unfair,

and psychologists are quick to point out the dangers of family favouritism.

Another study claims children growing up with parents who play favourites
are more likely to develop depression when they are middle aged,
and this is true even if they themselves were the favourite!

Favouritism is an ugly human habit.

It's common, and it's damaging,

and the NT wants to make sure that we do everything within our power
to not let it become established within *God's household*,

within the church of Jesus Christ.

Today we make a return to the NT book of James.

People love the book of James because he's so darn practical!

The reason he's practical is because he wants

Christian lives to match up with Christian beliefs.

Not only are we to believe with our hearts and minds
but he wants us to act out our faith as well.

Take a look at James 2.1 My brothers and sisters,

believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism!

That's the headline and takehome message of our passage today,

a headline emphasizing both a belief and an action.

James will explain *why* favouritism is inappropriate for believers a little later on,
but before he does that he gives an illustration
of the type of behaviour he's concerned about.

Verse 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring
and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in.
The scene James paints for us is a church service with two new guests!
It's always exciting when a new person comes to church isn't it?
Is this a new friend? Is this a new contributor to our church life?
Is this a person we can help to grow?

But the picture James paints for us has for us has one important complication:
one is rich and the other is poor.

You can tell by the clothes they are wearing.
These days it's not that easy to tell a rich person by their clothes.
Jas and I were in a lift on the city when the doors opened
and in walked a young woman wearing tracksuit pants and a singlet.
[I thought to myself "This is nice part of the city;
who's this bogan who's just got in?"]
And after she exited the lift Jas says to me "that was Pink!"
[(James also has something to say about Judgmentalism which we'll get to!)]
Pink is a popular musician who is worth millions and millions of dollars,
but you couldn't tell by what she was wearing.
[Looking back now, knowing it was Pink I'm lucky she didn't deck me!]
But back in Biblical times your clothes told others a lot.

So what happens when these two guests arrive?

Verse 3 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,"
⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?
Is this a familiar scene for you?

A scene where special honour is ascribed to one visitor
while another is treated less favourably?

It may be that we rush to welcome the young family
rather than the older person who's on their own.

Maybe there's a moral judgment that we exercise.
"That person looks like they're on drugs,
I'm not sure where her husband is,
I think that he just looks a little bit too rough."
And so we might tolerate them, but we don't treat them with honour.

In my experience a big dividing factor in churches is mental health.

I grew up in a city church, St Johns Parramatta,
and we used to get some very needy people coming along.
One time this guy turns up wearing a white sheet, carrying a massive staff,

he'd done something really weird to his hair,
 it was long at the back and shaved to the skin at the front,
 and he was announcing that he was Jesus,
 Jesus reincarnated and joining us for church.

I remember the awkward moment

when some of us had arranged to go out to dinner after the service,
 and he was like "Great! Let's eat!" So what do you do?
 I think we told him he wasn't welcome, which didn't feel right afterwards,
 I think it was a mistake.
 But its difficult, isn't it? Taking him with us wasn't a great idea either.
 Rejecting favouritism doesn't mean letting go of all discernment.
 He came across as really unstable and physically dangerous,
 and a restaurant might not have been a great option with his big staff.
However, we could have used our imaginations
 and come up with *something* where he could have been included.

It was tempting to argue

that by the time church was over we'd done all that was required of us;
 that we'd welcomed him in for the service
 and the after-church activity could remain invitation only.
 But I don't think that would have been good enough for James,
 because in his example the poor person is welcomed in,
 it's just that once they're in there they find further forms of discrimination.

Favouritism is a reality of life, isn't it? It happens at home, it happens at work,
 But James doesn't want it to happen in the church.

What *is* the big problem when it comes to favoring one person over others?

James gives us a whole bunch of reasons,
 some of which are positive reasons,
 —these are the good things we gain by fighting favouritism—
 and he leaves us with some negative reasons;
 the bad things we'll receive if we fail to fight it.

Have another look at verse 4

James argues that when we practice favouritism
 we have discriminated among ourselves
 Favouritism is like a big knife that splits families down the middle,
 be they families of flesh and blood or families of the Holy Spirit.
 And families ought to be unified!

In the church we each have the same Father,

we are each saved by the same man, Jesus Christ,
 and we each have the same Holy Spirit dwelling within us.
 There is more that unifies us than divides us,

and so when we start to show a preference for one person over another
it's a step away from the unity that's been established among us by God.

Here at Waitara Anglican we appear to do really well on this front
because when you look around we're a pretty diverse group,
its our trust in God that unifies us ahead of any racial factors.
But we need to make sure some other discrimination doesn't sneak up on us,
like favouring someone on account of age or social status.

And the type of discrimination that concerns James the most,
the type which *does* look at someone's wealth and social status,
that's a type of favouritism which the church really *must* fight against,
because if we're successful in that fight
we'll be demonstrating something profoundly true about God.

V 5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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?

When you read through the whole Bible a certain pattern starts to emerge:
God often picks the losers. He often picks the failures
The OT nation of Israel were nothing special in the list of ancient peoples.
They didn't have pyramids like the Egyptians
or hanging gardens like the Babylonians, but God chose them.
In the NT Paul reminds the Corinthians that when they became Christians,
Not many of them were wise, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth.
But God still chose them.

Why does God choose the less impressive humans to play on his team?
Because it demonstrates that we are nothing, and that God is everything,
and that all that we have in this life and the next comes because of his mercy.

And so when we decide to place honour upon those who are less fortunate,
we are embodying one of the deepest Christian truths;
We are nothing, but God is gracious and bestows honour upon honour
upon undeserving people.

So these are some of the gains we receive when we fight against favouritism
But there are some warnings here in this passage as well;
warnings as to what will happen if we allow favouritism to stay and fester.
Verse 8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself,"
you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as
lawbreakers.

Showing favouritism breaks God's law.
God cares so much about this that he wrote a law about it.
This means that it's a sin to indulge in favouritism.

And we cant get around this by saying

“Oh the law is an OT thing and we are NT people”.

No, James refers to this law as the *royal* law,
the law that has been established by the King, Jesus.

And Jesus does mention this law in Matt 22.

And nor is it legitimate to trade this law off against others,

We do that sometimes, don't we?

Agree to obey one thing for a free pass elsewhere

*“I'll give money, I'll never get drunk,
but I just cant be seen with the wrong people, that's too much.”*

James says that you can't pick or choose like that, v 10: For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

James introduces a really important concept: God's standard is perfection.

If we fail in one area then our whole standing comes crashing down.

Imagine if I were to tell you that I was going to pierce this balloon with a skewer.

But that you shouldn't worry, because I was only going to piece it in one spot.

Nothing bad will happen, there'll be no *bang*

because I'm not making a big hole, just a small one.

What's the worst that could happen? It's just a small hole!

Well, we know balloons just don't work like that, and neither does God's law.

Break one part of it and the whole thing is ruined.

You may have heard preachers speak about how God's standard is perfection,
well, this is one verse where we're told that very thing.

God demands perfect obedience,

including the obedience of resisting favouritism.

So we must obey all this lest we bring about God's judgment.

Verse 12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,

¹³ because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

Friends, God hates favouritism.

And if we fail to show others the mercy of fair and honourable treatment

then he's going to say something about this on the day he calls us to account.

This is why we must turn to Jesus, because who's never shown favouritism?

We're all guilty, and so we must all turn to Christ and receive his forgiveness,
which he promises us, because remember, he chooses imperfect people.

But then the task remains of rooting out all the last remnants of favouritism
so that bit by bit our actions start reflecting the God we worship.

And if we manage to do this then the end result is truly a beautiful thing.

I've told you about a time when I've failed to do this,

I'll close with an example of when its been done really well.

There was another inner city church that I was a part of
where we had a well loved member of the congregation who,
again, was battling some very serious mental illness.

We were not quite sure what was wrong with John,
but he was brilliant with numbers, he was always filthy and messy,
and he was always first at church on a Sunday night.
I gave him the job of counting the weekly attendance,
which he did every week during the sermon
and immediately after he finished counting he would walk up to me,
even in the middle of the sermon
and announce to me the attendance for that week,
"there are 42 people here tonight Mr Kemp"
and then I'd pause and thank John for his contribution.

After church another member of the congregation and I
would take turns driving John home, and the car would stink.
After I dropped him at the hostel where he lived
I'd wind all the windows down to get the smell out as I drove home.
But we loved John and we were determined to treat him with honour.

What helped was that it was a team effort.
Some people are difficult to love
and so you cant just leave it up to one person to do the caring.
There was a group of older ladies who took John under their wing
and they would take him out for lunch and throw birthday parties for him.
It became a really important ministry,
not only because of what it did for John,
but for what it communicated to the rest of us:
we are nothing but recipients of God's mercy.

Friends it is so easy to favour some and shun others,
but there is *so much to gain* if we manage to resist it. So much to gain!
So will you allow me to lead us in prayer
as we ask the God of mercy to help us imitate him.