

JAMES 2: 1 – 13 – SUNDAY MAY 26TH

Introduction – box of roses – have you a favourite?
Name it and claim it!

We have favourites in all sorts of different contexts – favourite TV programmes, favourite type of music, favourite films – the list goes on.

We know that there will always be a variety of tastes and opinions – which is good because wouldn't it be boring if we all liked the same things?

But there is one area where having favourites does become a problem – and that is the problem of favouritism when it comes to people.

It is clear from this book of James that it was a problem in the church then – and I assert it therefore could easily become one in any church including this one.

What do I mean by favouritism – and how and why can it become a problem?

Let me say what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean we shouldn't have a close, special friendships. Jesus himself in His earthly ministry was particularly close to three of the disciples – Peter, James and John. I believe we need people to be open, honest, vulnerable, and accountable to – and that can't be everybody. So having those types of relationships is not a sign of the favouritism James is speaking out against here.

So what is meant here by favouritism – the type that we must be aware of and guard against?

Favouritism happens when you accept and welcome someone purely on the grounds that you like the look of them – and the reverse is when you discriminate against someone and make no effort with them either because you don't like the look of them or they are just not like you!

James in his challenging, blunt way declares that this should have no place in the Church

In the passage we have today he explains why:

JAMES 2: 1 – 13

James asks a straight question – “Do you show favouritism or not?”

James was a leader in the Church in Jerusalem – which we know was poor.

At this time slavery was common and accepted – many slaves were in the Church – a huge gap existed between the poor and rich.

So, it must have been a natural reaction for the people in the Church to get excited if a rich and powerful person turned up at the meeting - the temptation was to treat them with particular care and attention.

James sets this question:

“Suppose a rich man with gold rings and fine cloths walks in...”

Rings in those days were a sign of wealth and power. The moss brothers of those days hired out rings for special occasions if you were rich.

Apparently Clement of Alexandria wrote a document saying a Christian should not wear more than one ring – and it should only be worn on the little finger – the significance of which no one has worked out!

Behind this rich man walks in someone else. He looks different – is dressed shabbily – we are not so impressed by this man.

He is not as welcome and treated as warmly as the rich man.

James uses this simple illustration because he wants to highlight the seriousness of favouritism – of partiality – of discrimination.

He is highlighting the seriousness of people being evaluated by what is on the outside – the externals.

When that happens it is not so much the world creeping into the Church – it is more like sprinting in!

And if it is like that in the church, then we are no different to the world and therefore have nothing to say to the world – do we?

Let us look at ourselves honestly.

Favouritism – partiality – discrimination.

I want to suggest that it is there within us all to a greater or lesser extent – and if we don't recognise this then we won't treat this challenge seriously.

An example of someone who admitted this was in his heart – probably the most well-known person alive – Nelson Mandela.

He wrote a book called "The long road to Freedom".

Mandela said that after he was freed he started to travel the world as a powerful political figure and he went on a plane to Kenya. He says that when he saw the pilot was black he immediately felt unsafe. He wrote this: "You see, even in me, with the colour of the skin the same, there was still engrained deep within me that the black man was inferior to the white".

I was struck by his willingness to admit that – I am impressed by his honesty.

For it underlines that prejudice, discrimination – on appearance alone – runs very deep in all of us. We need to be honest – how much do we judge and respond to people according to outward appearance? Or what people have achieved and their worldly status?

James gives us three reasons why this should not be so in the Church:

1. Because of the example of Jesus:

"My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism" (verse 1)

If Jesus is the Lord of glory – and He is our Lord - then this puts each one of us on exactly the same level. As Jesus is our Lord, it means we are all His servants, and so we are all equal. If He is our Lord, then how can we possibly become the judge of others?

But that is what seems to be happening – verse 4:

"Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"

If you make distinctions between people based on what they look like, you have become a judge of others. Is it not totally inconsistent to behave with this kind of favouritism - whilst at the same time declaring your belief in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

One paraphrase of James 2 verse 1 is this:

"Are you really trying to combine faith in Jesus Christ, our glorified Lord - with the worship of rank?"

You cannot hold the two together – faith and favouritism – they just don't match up.

Our glorious Jesus Christ – consider Him:

He came as a suffering servant

He identified with those who were misunderstood

He identified with those who never possessed anything.

He identified with those who were victims of prejudice and discrimination.

His pathway was not one of aggression – but of self-giving, sacrificial love.

So, if we declare and sing that He is "the glorious Lord Jesus Christ – there is a tremendous significance and implication for us.

One implication is that we build relationships with each other not according to the value the world gives - but that God gives. People should know they are valued not for what they are but for who they are. This must be one of the marks of the individual Christian believer - and also of the church that is claiming to glorify Jesus.

So, firstly favouritism is incompatible with true faith because of the example of Jesus and the implications of us calling Him Lord.

Second reason James gives us is:

Because of God's call:

"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? But you have dishonoured the poor.

(James 2 verse 5, 6)

How we behave towards one another indicates what we believe about God.

Here again James is underlining inconsistency.

Think about the people whom God has chosen.

Of course, God does not show favouritism, preferring a particular class or those from a particular culture. But He is especially concerned about those whom our society dismisses, or looks down upon or discards.

God shows His grace to the humble, the poor, and the needy because they are most keenly aware of their own inadequacy.

James sustains this refrain: God has a special concern for the poor and the helpless. Then he says something that must have shocked (and hopefully shamed) those receiving and hearing this letter:

"But you have dishonoured the poor".

It is a disgrace – is it not – if any Church dishonours the poor by showing deference to the rich?

How do you feel about the assertion that God has a bias to the poor?
Are you comfortable with it?

It is true that God's arms are outstretched to all – He responds to all who humble themselves before Him – He doesn't show favouritism when it comes to salvation.
But neither is God looking for worthy people.

I was helped by this quote from someone called Ronald Sider who has written prophetically and powerfully about God's heart for the poor:

“ In contrast to the way you and I , as well as the comfortable and powerful of every age and society, act towards the poor, God seems to have an overwhelming bias in favour of the poor. But He is biased only in contrast with our sinful unconcern. It is only when we take our perverse preference for the successful and wealthy as natural and normative that God appears bias.”

Scripture is consistent in warning that the powerful and the wealthy and the proud are going to have a tough time. It is the poor, those who know their need of God, who are rich in faith, who will inherit the kingdom.

Have you heard of Sam Harris? He is one of the aggressive atheists like Richard Dawkins. In one of his books called “Letter to a Christian nation” he argues that religion is really bad for you on the back of the following evidence:

“Norway, Iceland, Australia, Canada, Sweden, Switzerland, Belgium, Japan, the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United Kingdom are among the least religious on earth. According to the European development report they are also the healthiest, as indicated by life expectancy, adult literacy, per capita income, educational attainment, homicide rate and infant mortality.

Conversely, the 50 nations now ranked lowest in terms of the United Nations human development index are unwaveringly religious!”

In other words – the least Christian nations are largely in the north and are pagans – but they are healthy and wealthy pagans. The poorest nations are the most Christian nations.

So, there is the proof – religion – particularly Christianity - must be bad for you.

Discuss!

Leaving aside the glaringly obvious question of the morality of rich western nations which have plundered and exploited the world's poor, I would suggest Sam Harris needs to meet the Christian believers in these broken and poverty stricken places, and compare them with the affluent cynics of our society before he draws his conclusions as to who is really rich and in the healthiest position.

There are different kinds of riches and poverty aren't there – Jesus in the book of Revelation declared to the church in Laodicea that though they thought they were rich they were in fact (to quote Him)

“wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked”.

And here James declares this:

“Has not God chosen those who are poor – to be rich in faith”

If we judge people purely and simply on external appearances is it not possible that we may miss someone who is very rich in faith and very wise – someone who really knows and Loves the Lord and can teach us much about true riches and how to live properly.

If we judge on externals we are surely acting according to the world's values not God's – we are bowing to its snobbery that exalts the rich, the influential and the attractive.

That just can't be right!

So, after highlighting the example of Jesus Christ and considering whom God has chosen to be rich in faith, James gives us a third reason as to why faith and favouritism cannot go together :

“The royal Law of Love” – James 2 verses 8 – 11.

Here James quotes from Leviticus 19 – the law to “Love your neighbour as you love yourself”.

He calls it the royal law perhaps because it is this law that rules over all other laws.

The call to Love our neighbour means we are to treat everyone, rich and poor, in the same way. We are to love as God loves – no favourites!

To discriminate is to decide who is worthy of my Love and who is not.

So favouritism is a failure of Love.

James asserts that in terms of breaking the law – God's commands to us – we should treat showing favouritism as seriously as we would adultery or murder.

Now, I reckon all of us here would say – “adultery and murder – now that is really bad – that is really breaking God’s law big time”.

But James says “you can’t do that – cannot say “that sin is really bad – but that sin is not so serious - and can actually be tolerated”.

He argues that we must treat showing favouritism as seriously as we would adultery and murder. If that is not a wakeup call on this issue I don’t know what is!

Do we take the Royal Law of Love seriously?

Surely we must – and that means we must see showing favour to people based on externals as being a sin that we need to repent of and guard our hearts against. We just cannot be selective in saying which sins we must avoid - and at the same time which ones we chose to turn a blind eye to.

Love is not just for the lovely or those who are easy to love because they will love you back. Love continues even when we tire of a person and we want to move on. We have the warning that without Love we are nothing – we gain nothing – we are just making a noise. But if we love and treat each other the way we are called to it provides proof that God’s Love has indeed touched and is transforming us and provides a living statement of God’s truth and heart for the world – which for us in practice means all those we personally come into contact with.

Everyone we meet is not perfect, has sinned and rebelled and is flawed in some way – all, indeed, have fallen short of the glory of God.

True?

Remember that – particularly when you meet someone who is rich, powerful or attractive or influential.

Remember they are a sinner in need of forgiveness.

Also – remember that everyone we meet is precious in God’s sight, so much so that Jesus came and gave his life. Remember that particularly when you meet someone you might regard as poor and weak and are tempted to think as unimportant or insignificant.

Let us think how we can practically work on this here at the Mission – for we are not the perfect Church and this passage – as part of the Living word of God - surely has something very challenging to say to us.

What about who we talk to after the service?

Do we discriminate and show any favouritism there?

What about if we have a home and we have some lunch prepared and we decide to invite someone back to share that lunch with.

Do we discriminate and show any favouritism there?

Do we exclude anyone on the grounds of outward appearance or our personal preferences?

Now, people have shared with me that they have experienced this here – which I found shocking and something not to be ignored.

If that is the case we must read this passage here from the word of God as a serious rebuke – a wakeup call to take these words of James very seriously.

As we were told in the previous chapter – we must not just be hearers of the word but be doers – lest we deceive ourselves.

Let us look at our own hearts and respond both individually and corporately – to the command James gives us - for our own good and for the sake of the Glory of God and his Kingdom.

Let me read 12, 13 to finish.

“Mercy triumphs over judgement”

Yes we have all fallen short – but the cross of Christ cries out to us that mercy triumphs over judgement. I hope you have accepted that, embraced that and allowing it to touch every area of your life.

One way it will show is that we continually show mercy to triumph over judgement in our relationships. How? Accept one another, be gracious – don’t evaluate others on outward appearance or by worldly standards – be dismissive of no one.

Showing mercy to those in need – a sustained theme all the way through the book of James – is a necessary sign of true faith and obedience. Showing mercy does not win salvation for us, but it is proof of genuine faith and therefore proof of the reality of our capacity to experience God’s mercy.

The simple Royal Law of Love says: "I am to Love my neighbour as myself" Which means I am to stop being critical and judgemental – and I am to reflect God's heart in my mercy – in my graciousness - and in my generosity to others.

Let's pray:

After hearing what James had to say let us be reminded what Paul wrote to the Church in Galatia?

"You were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command:

"Love your neighbour as you love yourself"

Lord, we confess that we haven't kept this royal law in all our relationships.

We ask for your forgiveness. Please do forgive us.

Thank you that mercy triumphs over judgement.

Give us your spirit so that instead of hearts of stone we may have hearts of flesh. Help us to live out this great royal law day by day – give us the strength so that we may serve one another in love – and in doing so bring you glory.

Lord, guard our hearts against showing favouritism – against being prejudiced and being judgemental. Help us now to consider afresh the lord Jesus – how he came to us – how he lived – how He died on the Cross, rose and is now Lord of heaven and earth.

Lord, you have called us to continue His work of peace and reconciliation and reveal you to those we meet.

Forgive us the sins that divide us.

Give us the courage to overcome our fears and to seek the unity which is both your gift and your will.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Song – (as a prayer) – "I will offer up my Life"