

NO FAVOURITISM

James 2:1-13

Leo Douma

12th August 2018



I want you to imagine we have a visitor standing over there at the church entrance. You can tell he is a visitor because he doesn't quite know what to do or where to sit. He is very late. We have already started the sermon. But I don't think we will mind. I mean look at how he is dressed. Tailor made suit, expensive watch and gold ring. Very dapper! He has the assured manner of someone who used to privilege and power. He probably holds an important position like a company executive or high government office. He is standing at the door wondering what to do. I'm sure one of our greeters will jump up and make him feel welcome. What are you thinking about him? Nice to have a guy like that in the church? Would help meet the budget? Could become a leader? Looks intelligent and talented. Hey, look there is someone else at the door. He is a lot different though. Looks more like a homeless person. Isn't dressed too well for church with his football shorts and singlet, bare feet. He smells too, not just from lack of washing. It must be that bag of fish and chips he has in his hands. Oh, he's eating them now. He is waiting at the door as well. Is someone going to get up and welcome him? Or are we hoping he will just go away? What are you thinking about him? A bit scruffy for church? He would be more of a burden if he attended our church?

Would I be describing any of our reactions to these two imaginary people? James was certainly concerned about his readers showing partiality, favouring one type of person over another. He writes (James 2:1) *"My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism."* As an illustration of what he means he tells the little story of the two visitors, like I have just done: *"Suppose a man comes..."* he says. His illustration is still very relevant for us. Still today there is a culture of pandering to the rich and powerful in our communities. Favouritism can be shown for many other reasons besides favouring the rich over the poor. People can be discriminated against based on their race, or their gender, or their age, their beliefs. We ourselves can fall into being partial towards one group of people over another. Who might you tend to favour or discriminate against? Are you aware of it? We are predominately an educated white middle-class church with families. How would the Hope on Friday folk fit in with us? Would we treat everyone who might come to our church with the same love? Would we regard them all with the same respect, the same humility and care? Would we want for all of them to be part of our community?

We need to be very aware here. For as James makes clear if we show favouritism it is not just a matter of how we treat others. In fact, it goes to the heart of our faith. James would say that favoritism denies our faith in Jesus. James in chapter 1:26-27 gave three tests to see how authentic our faith is. One of them was "...to keep oneself from being polluted by the world". Pandering to the rich and famous, preferring one racial group over another, is very much what goes on in our world. Another test was: "*Religion that our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in distress.*" That is, care for those who have no resources to look after themselves. James now follows up these general ideas in more detail.

He holds up 'favoritism' over against the 'glory' of the Lord. (James 2:1) "*Do not with favoritism have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the glory*". Why does James introduce the idea of the glory of Jesus? Well the word 'glory' means the 'revealing of God'. It refers to God revealing his presence, or some aspect of his character. For example, in Exodus 33:18 Moses asks of God "*Show me your glory*". And God replies, "*I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my Name the Lord, in your presence.*" Now here in our text Jesus is described as "...the glory". That's because he personally reveals to us what God is like. In 2 Corinthians 4:6 Paul speaks of "...the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus." And how does Jesus reveal God? As Paul says later in that letter (2 Corinthians 8:9) "*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, might become rich.*" Jesus revealed himself as one of the humble, one of the poor, who came 'not to be served but to serve'.

So, the whole problem of favouritism, especially towards the rich, is that it goes against how Jesus revealed himself. That is what James is getting at (James 2:4) when he says, "*Have you not discriminated amongst yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*" The word 'discriminated' has the meaning to 'face both ways'. It's what Jesus referred to in Matthew 6 as "...trying to serve two masters". That is to have it both ways, with God and money. James' story of the two men refers to those who are in church. They are there to worship the glory of God. But their favoured treatment of the rich man showed they still worshipped the glory of money. James sees clearly how a partiality towards the rich treats their wealth as more valuable than Christ. For James it is unthinkable that this should be tolerated in the lives of people who are believers in the glory of Christ. As I said the issue here goes to the heart of faith. Who or what is it we really worship? If we really worship God, then we will display his glory as Jesus did. In other words, we will act towards all people as Jesus would. With grace whatever their circumstances.

James goes on to show from salvation history and his readers own experience that they should not favour the rich. First, he says (James 2:5) *"Listen...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 to those who love him?"* James is observing that God chose many poor people to have faith and so inherit the kingdom. He probably had in mind Jesus' saying in his Sermon on the Mount, (Luke 6:2) *"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"*. He would have been thinking of the Old Testament tradition of God's care for the poor. The 'poor' are not just the spiritually poor. James writes of those who are 'poor in the eyes of the world'. That is folk who are deprived of money and power. The Hebrew word for 'poor' comes from a word meaning 'pliable'. That is, they are easy to push around because they had no resources. They were often the ones who humbly received care from the hand of God because they had nothing else. For example, God in his grace chose Israel for his own treasured possession. As Moses wrote (Deuteronomy 7:7) *"The Lord did not set his affection on you and chose you because you were more numerous than other people, for you were the least of all peoples. But it was because he loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefather..."* Think of Mary. Amazed that someone so humble was called by God to bear the Christ child she sang (Luke 1:52) : *"God 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 a way empty."* James growing up in the home of Mary and Joseph must have been acutely aware of the inequality of life. He saw how the scales were often tipped against the poor in favour of the rich.

Again, and again we can read of the loving grace of God. He has deep concern for those on the bottom of the pile, those other people prefer to forget. God shows no partiality. He says to anyone, no matter how life has kicked them around or how messed up they are: 'Come to me in your humility. Receive me in faith. And I will lift you up higher than any king on earth. For my son lowered himself and died. He has paid for all the sin of anyone who has faith. You will be my child. You will inherit the kingdom of heaven.' So, James says 'If God has a soft spot for the down trodden, how can you favour the rich?' Doing that James says (2:6) *"...you have insulted the poor"*. Yet, throughout history the church has succumbed to being dazzled by riches. For example, the popes in Rome and the sale of indulgences. Or in the Netherlands the rich buying the comfortable pews near the front of the church and the poor sitting in the back and cold sections of the church. Or the televangelists gaining huge wealth from their ministries. Doing that they have not understood the true richness of faith, 'inheriting the kingdom of God'.

Having shown them how God acts, James changes tack and reminds his readers of their own experience. (James 2:7) *"Is it not the rich who are exploiting you?"* The rich Jews of the time were using their position and influence to persecute the Christians through the courts. In the process they had to slander the name of Jesus. They made him out to be a rebel and so charged his followers with treason against the Roman empire. So again, James asks them. To whom do you belong? To Christ? Are you glorifying him? If that is what you want, then why show favouritism to those who *"...slander the noble name of him to whom you belong?"* ?

Perhaps James' readers were trying to get on the good side of these rich people because of the persecution. Perhaps his readers tried to excuse their actions by saying they were showing respect to the rich as the 'royal law' commanded: *"Love your neighbour as yourself."* James responds (James 2:8) *"If you really keep the royal law found in scripture you are doing right."* 'Loving your neighbour' is what it's all about. This is what God wants. Whether people are rich or poor, old or young, black or white, whomever we find as our neighbour, we are to love them. We are to take care of them as we would take care of ourselves. But the problem is that we do so often pick and choose. We favour some and avoid others.

James points out (James 2: 9) *"...if you show favouritism you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers."* We can imagine the early Christians saying 'Yes, we showed favouritism to the rich. OK, but that was just one thing. Don't make such a big deal out of it. Don't condemn us as lawbreakers.' James, disagrees. It is a big thing. (James 2:10,11) *"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery' also said 'Do not murder'. If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder you have become a lawbreaker"*. In other words, the law of God is a single unity. You cannot see it as separate bits. The law is not like a pile of stones. You can take one stone away and you still have a pile of stones. The law is more like a pane of glass. One crack and it is all affected. Or it's like a chain. Break one link and the whole chain is affected. The law is one unit because God is one. Each commandment is a reflection of God's character. So, when we faithfully obey the law, we reveal the glory of God. And further, when we live faithfully by what God requires we are set free. We are made in God's image. So, when we obey God we find our true character. That's what James means when he says (James 2:12) *"Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom."* But when we fail, even one part of the law, we degrade the glory of God. And we degrade ourselves and others around us. We put God down and we put others down.

So, what about us? How are we doing in displaying the glory of God? Is there favouritism in our communities? Definitely. What about our congregation? I think there are those who feel it. The church in Australia relates mostly to the middle class. It doesn't always relate well to the poor. We cater for the poor. But do they feel comfortable in our churches. It is important for us to consider this. Not just as a social issue. But as James concludes (2:13) "*Judgement without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.*" That is, if you are not compassionate to your neighbour, especially those down trodden, you will get no compassion from God. James is not suggesting salvation by works here. That is, if we love others God will love us. Rather, James is saying that our compassion is a sign that God's love has touched our lives. For how can anyone who has felt the love and grace of God not have love and grace towards others? If we show favouritism towards some people but have no compassion for others it begs the question about our relationship with God. Reality is, we who have experienced the love of God do mess up in this area. So how can we be certain of God's grace to us if we use our behaviour as the measuring scale. We can't. The only certainty we have is in Jesus. He has fully paid for our failure, even in this area of favouritism. And it's when we honestly confess our failures here that he is merciful and forgives. As James blurts out in the end "*Mercy triumphs over judgement*". Grace will boast over punishment. Thank God for that! We know to be true. Grace is the glory we see in Jesus.

PS- the fellow in footy shorts and singlet, smelly and eating fish and chips in church. That's a true story. And he is a fine Christian.