



Session 3 – James 2:1-13

NO FAVOURITISM!

Favouritism goes against our faith in Jesus (v.1-4)

v.1 is one of the two verses in this letter in which James actually mentions Jesus: he describes him as our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus reigns as Lord in glory – in a position of judgement – and he judges with complete impartiality. A complete absence of favouritism is a characteristic of God (Acts 10:34, Rom 2:11, Col 3:25); in Jesus' earthly life, even his enemies admitted that he showed no favouritism (Luke 20:21). It should be the same for those who believe in him.

The illustration in v.2-4, gives a clear example of how favouritism might be shown – discrimination against the poor. James describes a meeting of Christians: visitors are welcome, but the rich are made more welcome than the poor. These Christians have not learnt to think in a consistently Christian way; instead, sinful thoughts have made them judgmental.

Favouritism – a pandering to the rich, treating people differently according to their outward appearance or social status – is completely contrary to our faith in Jesus who shows no favouritism.

Favouritism goes against God's attitude to the poor (v.5-7)

When the Bible refers to "the poor," it most often means people whose material poverty has led them to depend on God. God's attitude to them is one of compassion (see eg Ps 68:5, Isa 25:4, Mat 11:5, Luke 1:52f, 4:18, 6:20 (cf Mat 5:3) and all the OT laws (eg Deut 24) for the protection of the poor). By contrast, those who are rich can very often be self-satisfied and think that they have no need of help from anyone else – not even from God (eg the Christians in Laodicea – Rev 3:14ff.)

God very frequently turns the world's way of thinking upside-down (eg Mark 10:31, Luke 1:52f) and James reminds us of the riches which God bestows on the poor. If Christians show favouritism towards the rich, and so discriminate against the poor and dishonour them (as in v.3, when the poor man is sent to sit on the floor), then they are displaying a worldly attitude which is the opposite of God's attitude.

James adds that pandering to the rich defies common sense. In the early church, a considerable majority of Christians were poor (see 1Cor 1:26) and this was especially true in the church in Jerusalem (see eg Acts 11:29, Rom 15:26). James says that Christians who are poor are suffering at the hands of rich people who exploit them (see also 5:4), drag them into court (probably when they can't pay their debts) and do so in a way that insults the name of Jesus. Why on earth would they, Christians in poverty, be favouring people like that?!

Favouritism goes against the command to love our neighbour (v.5-13)

"Love your neighbour as yourself" is the *royal* law – ie the law of the Kingdom – central to everything that Jesus taught his followers about life in the kingdom of God.

Jesus illustrated what this means in the parable about the good Samaritan who showed practical love towards a Jew – the very sort of person he would have been expected to discriminate against. Genuine love reaches out to the unattractive as well as the attractive, and doesn't expect anything in return.

If you show love like that, says James, you are doing well; but if you show favouritism towards one person at the expense of another, you have failed to show love: you are a law-breaker.

This attitude of love should be evident in our words and our actions (v.12). James reminds us (repeating 1:25) that Jesus' commands are "the law that gives freedom." *Love your neighbour* isn't a law that acts as a straight-jacket that prevents us from living a happy life; it frees us from being slaves to our selfish instincts and, as the Holy Spirit grows the fruit of love in us, enables us to speak and act in the way that is best both for us and for the people whom we meet.

In v.12 & 13, James turns to the idea of *mercy* – the mercy we give and the mercy we receive. In the parable of the good Samaritan, the Samaritan is described as “the one who had mercy” on the injured man. We too are called to show mercy towards the poor by refusing to show favouritism towards the rich or anyone else.

If we fail to show mercy, and so fail to keep the command to love our neighbour, that will result in judgment; therefore we are in constant need of God’s mercy. But if we don’t show mercy to others, can we expect God to show mercy to us? (See Mat 5:7, and the parable of the unmerciful servant – Mat 18:21-35.)

We cannot earn God’s mercy by being merciful. James ends this section with a reminder of the good news of the gospel: God’s mercy – shown towards us not because we deserve it but because he graciously gives it – triumphs over judgment. Even though our love is imperfect, and we show favouritism, God’s love is perfect.

For homegroups

- Imagine that you are a welcomer in church one Sunday morning. What sort of people do you secretly dread coming in? What would you do if they did come in?
- We are often guilty of ‘labelling’ people. What sort of labels do we use, and how might that lead us either to show them favouritism or to discriminate against them?
- Bishop David Sheppard, in his book of the same title, referred to God's "bias to the poor." Is it appropriate to use such a word as "bias" in relation to God?
- Is it easier to have faith when you are poor than when you are rich?
- What should we be doing about those who are poor?
- How can we show love to our neighbour who is rich?
- In the parable, the good Samaritan met and helped someone from whom he was separated by a huge social and religious divide. What might be the equivalent for a resident of Ely?

- Put yourself in the shoes of each of the following people in turn. What things, if they happened, would make you feel discriminated against? What things, if they happened, would make you feel welcomed and keen to come again?
 - A mother of two lively children aged 4 and 6. It is your first visit to church (apart from Christmas) for many years, but you have decided that you want your children to have some exposure to things Christian.
 - A recently retired couple who have moved to the area. You have had little contact with church in the past but, now that you have more time, you have decided to see what happens in your new local church.
 - A young couple planning to get married soon. You want to see what church is like before deciding whether to opt for a church wedding.
 - A pensioner who has recently been widowed. You don't normally attend church, but found the funeral helpful and are wondering whether the church might be able to offer some answers to your questions about life.