

James 2:1-13 – Favouritism Forbidden

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism.

²Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³If 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,' ⁴have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵Listen, 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? ⁶But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

⁸If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbour as yourself,' you are doing right. ⁹But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as law-breakers.

¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

¹¹For he who said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' also said, 'You shall not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a law-breaker.

¹²Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Called to indiscriminate love

Do you remember the famous sketch by the Two Ronnies and John Cleese parodying the British class system. The three of them stand in a row. John Cleese, the tallest, is dressed in a dark suit and bowler hat and carries an umbrella. Ronnie Barker, shorter than John Cleese, stands in the middle dressed in a suit and tie but wearing a trilby. Next to him is the diminutive Ronnie Corbett dressed in shabby clothes an old scarf and a flat cap.

John Cleese, looking down at Ronnie Barker says, "I look down on *him* because I am upper class"

Ronnie Barker, looking up towards John Cleese responds, "I look up to *him* because he is upper class." Then, looking down to Ronnie Corbett, "But I look down on *him* because he is lower class. I am middle class."

Ronnie Corbett, first looking straight to camera says, "I know my place". Then looking up to Ronnie Barker and John Cleese, "I look up to them *both*. But I don't look up to *him* [meaning Ronnie Barker] as much as I look up to *him* [meaning John Cleese], because *he* has innate breeding."

And so the sketch goes on.

It's an amusing sketch, and may not be as dated as we initially feel. Contemporary society is still divided into many different groups based on education, colour, ethnicity, accent, gender and so on. We may not go round saying, "I look up to him ... but I look down on her..." But we may well think it.

What I want to ask you this evening is this, "Do you know you place?"

The letter of James was written to encourage Christians to more than a mere profession of faith. James is saying, "Mind the gap – the gap between what you say you believe and how you behave. You need, he is saying, to *learn to live the life*."

In particular, in the passage we read this evening, a variety of people were joining with Christians when they met together for worship. When rich, well dressed people came into the meeting, they were ushered into the best seats but when those who were poor and clothed in rags came in they were put where they would not be noticed. This is quite wrong, says James.

Note how James begins addressing this situation: "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism." That's why I ask you, "Do you know your place?"

We are met here as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. We have come to trust in him and have owned that he is our hope and our salvation because of all that he has done for us. And we have gladly responded to his call to follow him.

Well, who is this Jesus, and what has he done for us?

He is our *glorious* Lord Jesus Christ. He is elsewhere called, "The Lord of Glory". He is the eternal Son of God who, from all eternity, inhabited a place of unimaginable riches and glory. Yet he left his throne in glory and came into the poverty of a stable for our sake. The apostle Paul writes, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9.) He "did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage" but "rather, ... made himself nothing ... taking the very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2:6-7) and went at last to the cross. He did all this for our sake, to redeem us and make us his own. So we recognise that in ourselves, whoever we may be, we are poor; we lack anything we can boast of before God. Yet, in Christ, whoever we may be, we are rich, incalculably rich.

So do you know your place? If you are trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ this evening you are "in Christ". Joined to him, all that is his is yours and all that is yours is his. And this makes all the difference. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17 "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!" If you are "in Christ" you are part of God's new creation. This is your position, this is where you now are and where you belong. Do you know your place?

And Paul gives practical application of this truth in the preceding verse of 2 Corinthians 5, "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer." Being a Christian, being in Christ changes our perspective on everything.

Perhaps you know the old hymn of which the first two verses are:

Loved with everlasting love,
Led by grace that love to know;
Spirit, breathing from above,
Thou hast taught me it is so.
Oh, this full and perfect peace!
Oh, this transport all divine!
In a love which cannot cease,
I am His, and He is mine.

Heaven above is softer blue,
Earth around is sweeter green;
Something lives in every hue
Christless eyes have never seen:
Birds with gladder songs o'erflow,
Flow'rs with deeper beauties shine,
Since I know, as now I know,
I am His, and He is mine.

George Robinson expresses the way in which those who have come to know the love that the Lord Jesus has for them see the whole world from a different perspective.

This is what James is saying in the passage we are looking at this evening; being in Christ and knowing his love changes the way we view other people. If the Lord of glory has not been ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters, how can we ever be ashamed of any of our brothers and sisters in Christ?

Let's see how this perspective leads into practical application by James.

In the previous chapter, James writes, "Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation – since they will pass away like a wild flower. For

the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business." (James 1:9-11)

James is saying that those who lack riches in this world should recognise that they have been made rich in Christ. Let me remind you of the song:

Give thanks with a grateful heart
Give thanks to the Holy One
Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son

And now let the weak say, "I am strong"
Let the poor say, "I am rich"
Because of what the Lord has done for us"

In verse 5 of the chapter we read James writes, "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?" What greater riches can we have than to be heirs to a kingdom, and the glorious kingdom of Christ at that.

But those who are rich should recognise that the riches they possess in this world will soon pass away. "You can't take it with you", as we say, or, "There are no pockets in a shroud."

Being in Christ gives us a whole new perspective on ourselves and on one another, a new perspective which is to have real practical implications. We are to recognise that however we may differ from one another in wealth, education, class, ethnicity, accent, gender or age, in Christ we are brothers and sisters of one another; we are family (see James 2:1). As Paul expresses it in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

We are therefore to love, honour, respect, value and serve one another as Christ has loved us and given himself for us. To look down upon a Christian brother or sister – maybe because they are a different colour from us, have a particular disability or mental health problems – is to dishonour Christ. To elevate a brother or sister because we feel that they are of superior earthly rank is to forget that we have all been raised up to reign with Christ. It is to forget our place – that we and they are in Christ.

But what of those who are not yet in Christ – those who are not Christians? We are to view them also through the eyes of the Lord Jesus Christ who had compassion on those neglected and rejected by society – the tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners, and who spoke fearlessly to those with riches and power such as the rich young ruler. Christ saw all alike as sinners whom he loved, sinners in need of the compassion and grace of God.

James called his hearers, and he now calls us, to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. This is the "royal law" for it is the law of the King, the law of Christ – it is his call upon our lives as one who has loved us with love beyond our deserving. It is a law which brings freedom because it expresses the way that Christ has set us free from all the shackles of society's conventions and patterns of behaviour and has made us free to serve him in gladly serving others – whoever they may be.

We need to learn to live the life of the new creation, to see people through the eyes of Christ and no longer regard anyone from a worldly point of view.

Do you remember the parable of the sheep and the goats told by the Lord Jesus. Jesus welcomes the "sheep" into his kingdom saying that when he was hungry they fed him, when he was naked they clothed him... The sheep are perplexed for they do not remember having seen Jesus hungry or naked, but Jesus tells them, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40.) We need to see people through the eyes of the Lord Jesus and to see that in giving ourselves to them, whoever they may be and whatever their need, we are serving Christ. We need to recognise that whenever we fail to care for someone in need we are failing to serve Christ.

We need daily to keep guard over our own attitudes and behaviour to ensure that we are not drawn back into the patterns of this world's thinking but are continually renewed in our minds by the Spirit's work within us. We need to interrogate our own hearts to seek out where there is prejudice or any other attitudes inconsistent with the Spirit of Christ. We need to monitor our behaviour to see where we fail to

show the indiscriminate love of Christ to those around us. We need to pray that, by his Spirit, the Lord would complete his work of new creation in us and fill us with his compassion, wisdom and grace.

May the Lord Jesus make us daily more like him.

Peter Misselbrook

Christ Church Downend, 17th June 2018

1. Have you ever treated someone with extra respect and honour because they were rich or a celebrity? Is this wrong? If so, how?
2. How would you and your church respond if someone who was dressed badly and was dirty, came to your services? How would they be treated? How does God say we should treat them?
3. How would you define partiality and favouritism?
4. How would you define the true measure of a person? How does God? How should the church? How would these precepts affect the way your church chooses its leaders?
5. How do love and respect for each other contribute to your witness to Christ and evidence spiritual maturity?
6. What do you need to do to look inside yourself and observe by your actions, whether you are living as Christ calls you to live?
7. How can you be a person who shows respect for those that are commonly disrespected by society? Who might that be? What will you do?