

James 2:1-13

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[0 : 0 0] I've got an exercise for you to kick off the sermon. I want you to cast your mind back over the past few days and identify one or two evil thoughts that you have been guilty of harboring or pondering on. So, I'll give you a few moments to do that. Maybe if you could identify even just one evil thought that stands out, that's been present, lingering, or whatever evil thoughts do in your mind just in these past few days. You maybe don't need a few days, maybe a few hours would be sufficient, but I wonder if you've been able to come up with one. I'm a bit wary of this because it's almost provoking you to think evil thoughts, which is not my intention, but rather to examine yourself as to what evil thoughts you may have been thinking. Now, I would wager, and I may be wrong, and you can challenge me, probably after the service would be best, but you can challenge me if I am wrong, but I would wager that you have not identified showing favoritism as one example or fruit of your evil thoughts. Perhaps many of us would take the view that showing favoritism is bad, but it's not that bad.

It hardly ranks as evil in our measure of things. Well, God takes a different view. In the passage that we've read and that we're going to be thinking about this morning, favoritism is described as the product of evil thinking. Notice that in verse 1, you have the prohibition, don't show favoritism, very clearly.

And then in verse 4, you're given the reason why we do, on occasion, show favoritism. And the reason is presented in the form of a rhetorical question, have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts by showing favoritism implicit? So, James is very clear that to show favoritism is evidence of evil thoughts. It is a serious matter in the eyes of God.

Well, this is the theme or the matter, the subject that we want to give thought to this morning. And the way we're going to do it is posing three questions that I think are answered in the passage. Now, as I've already kind of anticipated, we're going to cover the whole of this section of James. And so, necessarily, we're going to be selective in the use of material within the verses that we've read, but hopefully in a way that does justice to the passage. But the three things that we're going to consider in the light of the passages, first of all, what is it? What is favoritism? How are we to understand that word, that reality of favoritism or showing favoritism, to use the language of the text?

But then also, and more briefly, just identify or comment on where it stems from. We've kind of already answered that just a moment ago, but we're going to delve into that a little bit more. Where does it stem from? And then, thirdly, and maybe we'll just pause and spend a little bit more time on this, is how can we combat it in our own lives? If we acknowledge that we are guilty or can be guilty or are guilty of showing favoritism, once we've established what it is, how can we combat it in the light of what James says? So, that sets up more or less what we're going to try and do this morning.

[4 : 00] First of all, what is favoritism? The Greek word that is translated favoritism there in verse 1 of James chapter 2, other translations use the expression show partiality, and you can see how they're very similar. But the Greek word that is translated in one of these two ways is a curious one. It's an intriguing one. The root word in the Greek language is the word *prosopon*, which means face, as in your face. So, the sense of the word is something along the lines of with respect to the face. So, don't deal with others with respect to their face. And I think you can get the idea of what's going on there. Don't come to a judgment on others with respect to their outward appearance, what they look like. That's the root of this word that is translated in the manner that it is here in verse 1 as showing favoritism. And I think that gives us a good sense of what James is talking about. Now, James goes on, of course, to give one example of showing favoritism there in verses 2 through to 4. But I think it's important to stress that it is just one example. There are many ways in which favoritism can find expression. Favoritism as defined, or as we're defining it on the grounds of the language that

James uses. But he does give this one example. In a moment, we'll broaden it out, but we can just look at the example that James gives. I think it's familiar to us. The example is of the rich man and the poor man appearing at a gathering of the believers. And James contemplates, and maybe he's witnessed this himself, I don't know, or he's imagining this scenario, we don't know, but he contemplates how these two people are treated very differently. So, the rich man is treated with all the graces and all the consideration, whereas the poor man is really just left to one side. I think one of the problems when we read this example that James gives, and if we limit ourselves to thinking about the one example he gives, is I think we can maybe feel a bit superior when we read that. Because I think, you know, we can read that example and say, well, you know, we wouldn't do that. I don't think we would. I don't think here in Bon Accord, if somebody rich came into the service, we would, you know, we would treat them with the kind of regard that's being suggested here. I hope that if somebody poor came into the service, we wouldn't treat them in the manner that is described here. So, we read the example, we think, well, we're all right. You know, we wouldn't do that. And we can move on. It's not a problem for us, because we wouldn't do what is indicated in the example that James gives.

Well, let's maybe just think a little bit more about how we could be guilty of the same kind of thing, even if we weren't to behave just as is presented here in James's example.

Imagine next Sunday, okay? It's too late for this Sunday. The service has started. But imagine next Sunday, you've arrived early at church. Some of you will find that very difficult to imagine, but, you know, try hard. But anyway, you're here already, and you're sitting in the service, and who should walk in the door but Dennis Law? I was trying to think of a famous Aberdonian.

I was struggling, actually, and that's the one that I came up with. So, Dennis Law appears, and you think, oh, it's Dennis Law. Okay. Now, if you prefer, some of you are thinking, who's Dennis Law? Shame on you. But anyway, if you prefer, maybe catering to a younger generation, Annie Lennox. Well, that wouldn't be a younger generation, perhaps. But Emily Sandy. I'm trying to cover all the generations, okay? But somebody famous who's got some connection to Aberdeen walks into Bonaccord. Now, it's an unlikely scenario, I concede. But one of these three, take your pick, whichever one you prefer, take your pick of one of them. He's walked in. They've sat down, and a couple of minutes later, an old guy comes in. And this guy comes in. He looks a bit disheveled. He's got a bit of a whiff of cheap booze. But he also comes in, and he sits down in the service. Now, I don't think, I don't know, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm deluding myself.

[8 : 58] I don't think we would treat these two people very differently in the course of the service. We'd maybe ignore them both. I don't know. But I don't think we would treat them very differently.

But now imagine this. You go home after the service, and a family member phones, and they say, oh, how was the service this morning? And then you say, well, you won't believe who was in church today. Now, what would you then go on to say? Oh, this old guy who smelled of booze. I don't think so.

You say, Annie Lennox was in Bonacord today. Wow. Or Dennis Law. He's a legend. He was in church. Is that not what you would say? Is that not who you would highlight? And does that not, even if the way we might treat somebody, I would hope, might not be so different, unlike the example James gives, is it not the case that in our attitudes as to who we regard of greater interest, even of greater value, is perhaps betrayed by the excitement that their appearance might cause?

But in trying to answer this question, what is favoritism, we need to broaden out the concept.

As I've been stressing, what James does is give one example of favoritism. But in the light of what the word means, we need to broaden out the concept to see how we can be guilty of this in other ways.

[10 : 35] Showing favoritism on account of outward signs of wealth or success, as in the example, is just one form of favoritism. In what other ways can we come to a judgment, which then leads to subsequent action, be that positive or negative, with respect to the face or on the grounds of what we see?

Well, let's think about the example I was talking to the children about. How about the color of somebody's skin? And let's just pause there for a moment. I guess that most of us would challenge any accusation or any suggestion that we're guilty of racism. We would say, no, I'm not. I'm not a racist.

And maybe with good reason. You would be on the defensive if that were suggested. And I imagine, I suspect that most of us are not racists. But do you, maybe even subconsciously, treat somebody differently because of the color of their skin or their ethnic origin? Are you more or less likely to approach and speak to somebody if they look different to you? Or will you keep your distance for that reason? It's something that we need to think about. How about the age of a person and the value that we give to somebody on the basis of how old they are? I think that's quite relevant in the context of a church. You know, we celebrate young people. You know, if a young couple, new couple, come into church, and they look like a young, new professional couple, they go, wow, wow, I hope they stay. I hope they keep on coming. You know, I hope they make this their church. You know, all they could contribute. But then if maybe an old lady from the neighborhood comes in, oh, that's nice.

Do we have that attitude? I'm posing the question. I'm not accusing anybody. I'm posing the question. You know, how do we value people on the basis of what they look like?

How about how people speak? If their speech is, as we would deem, educated or cultured, or is it just a bit common? Are we just snobs sometimes in the way that we deal with people? How people look? And here I'm thinking in terms of if people are good-looking or otherwise. Now, people say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and there's an element of truth in that. But is this not something that we need to reflect on? Do we give people more importance because they're good-looking? I think we do. I think if we're honest with ourselves and if we self-examine ourselves honestly, there is that tendency to be drawn to and to give greater attention to those people we think are attractive, even in the matter of their appearance. It's something for us to reflect on as well. That would be to fall into this sin of showing favoritism on treating people with respect to their face, what they look like. Well, there's a few ways in which perhaps we can be guilty of this sin. How does God describe this favoritism or judging by outward appearance? Does God describe it as somewhat unwise or somewhat inappropriate? No, He says it is sinful. In verse 9, but if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. And perhaps anticipating those who would belittle its seriousness, James echoes Jesus' teaching that failing at just one point of the law makes us guilty of breaking it all, as he goes on to comment there in verse 10. I read something very helpful about this principle that breaking one law makes us guilty of breaking the whole law, which we might think, well, it seems a bit unfair. But let me just quote the pertinent sentence that I felt captured why it is so that breaking one law makes us guilty of breaking all the law. And this is not original thought, but let me just read out what I read the other day about this. Critical to the argument is that the commandment is not just a text. And, you know, the commandments that were given don't show favoritism and all the others. The commandment is not just a text, but someone speaking. Notice how in verse 11, James says,

[15 : 08] For he who said, do not commit adultery, also said, do not murder. This is somebody, this is a person speaking. Of course, it's God speaking. God is speaking to us and telling us, don't show favoritism, don't commit adultery, don't murder, and we could go on. God is speaking to us. And to violate any one of the commandments that God personally addresses to us is to disobey God. And so, render a person guilty before Him, guilty in every respect. So, it's not just these individual laws and you say, well, I'll try and keep most of them and that's pretty good. No, God is speaking. He says, this is how you are to live.

This is what you are to do. This is what you are not to do. And when we break one of these commandments that He addresses to us in this personal way, then there's a real sense in which we are guilty of the whole body of commandments that all proceed from the same source.

Moving quickly on, what does favoritism stem from? I'm not going to dwell long on this question, but I do want to suggest one answer that I hope will give us opportunity to reflect and be perhaps a little more self-aware. We've already noted at the very beginning of the sermon, we noted that the act of showing favoritism is the outward expression of evil thoughts. There in verse 4, we find that.

And this simply serves to reinforce what James has already said concerning the root of temptation and sin and death as being our own evil desires, something that he said in the first chapter.

But in the matter of showing favoritism, where do these evil thoughts come from? Or put another way, what influences lead us to think in this prejudiced and discriminatory and, quite frankly, foolish way?

[17 : 08] So these are evil thoughts, but where do these evil thoughts come from? Really, that's my question. And I wonder if the last exhortation of chapter 1 might not have something to do with this.

The chapter divisions, of course, are imposed on the text. But notice the final thing that we have at the end of chapter 1. You have this definition of religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless. And one element of it is, the final thing stated there, is to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. To keep oneself from being polluted by the world. And I think this way of thinking being polluted by the world. That's the way the world operates. The world gives greater importance to the rich and the wealthy and the successful and the celebrities. That's how the world operates.

And if we're doing the same, then that's evidence that we've been polluted by the thinking and the value system of the world. Precisely what we're not to be. And so these evil thoughts are the product of a polluted mind. When the church loses its distinctive, God-given, and God-ordered voice, we soon find ourselves meekly aping the thinking and values of the world. We become polluted.

You know, consider the shameful role of the church in parts of the United States, in parts of South Africa, in past decades, in the defense and promotion of racism. And we are not free from guilt in this matter in our own country. So, the church of Jesus Christ adopting attitudes that were contrary to the Word of God. Why? Because their thinking had become polluted. Simply apic, the thinking and the values of a fallen world. That's where these evil thoughts that lead to evil actions stem from, or at least in part. Or what about the value that we assign to human beings at the very beginning of life in the womb, towards the end of life as old age and infirmity, debilitates mind and body? Well, the world in which we live in is increasingly of the view that on the basis of the weakness of their appearance, such lives are worthless and can be extinguished. Will God deliver us from being polluted by such worldly barbarism? Where does favoritism stem from? Where does this evil thinking that leads us to discriminate between fellow human beings, where does it come from? It comes from thoughts that have been polluted by thinking that comes from the world, and where we don't have a distinctive identity grounded in and molded by the Word of God. But let's briefly tackle the third question. How can we combat this kind of discrimination or favoritism? Well, James addresses this question this question in our passage. Now, I'm not going to explore all that he says, but let me suggest three ways stated or implied in the passage in which we can combat our evil tendency towards showing favoritism. First of all, we need to know who God is and what God is like. We also need to remember who we are, and we need to listen and obey to God's commands. So, first of all, we need to know who God is and what God is like. That's something that James draws the attention of his readers to in verse 5. Listen, my dear brothers, you who are guilty of showing favoritism, listen, listen, has not God?

And then he goes on to say, look, this is what God's like. This is what God does. What you're doing is the opposite. And so, he points them to God, that they would look at God. Now, before we note what he says there in verse 5, we can maybe take a step back and consider what we're told about God in the broader teaching of the Bible on this matter of showing partiality. You know, we read in Deuteronomy chapter 10 where it states very explicitly, God does not show partiality. In the New Testament, the very same word that is used here by James on a number of occasions is used in describing God as a God who does not show partiality. Let me just limit myself to one example for reasons of time. In Romans chapter 2 and verse 11, you can't get clearer or more explicit than this short verse, for God does not show favoritism. I'm giving the context of that, but as a standalone statement, it couldn't really be very clearer. So, this is what we're told about God. God does not show favoritism. God does not show partiality. And there in verse 5, very particularly, in the matter of God's salvation, He has not shown special consideration or partiality to the rich and famous. He hasn't shown His grace on the basis of our appearance or our merits or imagined merits. God's choice of His people is grounded in grace and grace alone. That is how He operates. The question might be asked on the basis of what's said there in verse 5, whether God shows partiality towards the poor. Does the pendulum swing in the other direction?

[22 : 54] I don't think that's what James is saying. James is inviting those who are showing partiality towards the rich to wake up and smell the coffee. He's saying, just look around and see how God has not favored the rich and powerful. He's not given them special treatment. He's saying, look, most of you are poor, and yet God loves you. God has chosen you. God has saved you. God's forgiven you. And yet, you perversely love the rich, esteem the rich, consider the rich more highly than you do the poor.

In his argument, James also invites his readers to consider what true wealth looks like, and it is to be rich in faith and an heir in God's kingdom. So, our Father shows no favoritism, and we are to be like our Father. So, that's the first way in which we can combat this evil way of thinking by looking to God and knowing our God better and what He is like. We also need to remember who we are. Notice how James begins this section of his letter. My brothers, as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. You see the connection that he's making. He's connecting the reality of who we are, our identity as believers, with his prohibition to show favoritism. He's saying that they're connected. It's because of who you are that you are not to behave in this way.

It's unbecoming of believers in Jesus to show favoritism. We are to be different from the world. We are to exhibit different values and priorities. It's an intriguing thing that this word translated show favoritism. I gave a little bit of its background right at the beginning, but another little detail that I didn't mention at the beginning is that this is a word that is not found outside of the New Testament. So, in parallel Greek writings, the word is unknown, and everything would suggest that it is a word that was coined by the New Testament writers. Why so? Why do they need to make up a word? Well, might it not be because in Greek, and indeed in Greek society, there was no verb that expressed showing favoritism as a bad thing because society didn't consider it a bad thing.

And so, a new Christian verb needed to be coined or invented. It just shows how countercultural God's people are being called to be. Yes, in the world, you know, there's this favoritism is shown, and everybody thinks it's fine, but not so with you. Why? Because you're believers in Jesus Christ.

You are to do things differently. You are to have different attitudes. Why, in particular, are believers in Jesus Christ not to show favoritism? Well, what we've already said concerning God applies to Jesus. He shows no favoritism on the grounds of appearance.

[25 : 58] But we can say more. This Jesus, our Lord, our Savior, in whom we trust and believe, He is the one who became poor for us. You know what Paul says on that matter in his letter to the Corinthians, 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. In the light of that reality, can you see the folly of favoring the rich and despising the poor when our own Lord willingly and lovingly became poor for us? I also wonder what James has in mind when he describes Jesus as our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. It's quite a striking description of Jesus as our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. And I wonder if James is maybe saying to the believers, you're to be so focused on, so captivated by the glory of your Savior that you'll have no time or inclination to be getting hung up about the outward appearance of those around you. You've got better things to do with your time. Focus on, glory in, be captivated by the one in whom you believe, our glorious Lord Jesus

Christ. And then you won't have time for the pettiness of showing favoritism, of being a racist, or being somebody who's distinguishing in the basis of somebody being wealthy or poor, or whatever other outward difference there might be. We need to remember who we are. We are believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. And as such, this is conduct unbecoming of who we are. But then the final thing we said is that we need to listen and obey God's commands. Now, we've already talked about how God commands us in different ways. But there in verse 8, very clearly, a command that relates so directly to this matter is presented to us. If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right. This is how we are to behave. We are to love our neighbor as ourself. And if we are to love our neighbor as ourself, then there'll be no room for for making these distinctions of discriminating between one or another on any one of the grounds that I've mentioned or perhaps others that I've left unmentioned. And so, in these ways, we can and we must combat our tendency, our sinful tendency, to do the very thing that we are told we ought not to do.

Well, let me just kind of return to where we began. We started with an exercise, and I want to finish with one that I can give to you for the week ahead. What I would urge you, what I would encourage you to do is to be consciously, and you need to think about this, it's not just going to happen, but deliberately and consciously be self-aware about how you view those around you. Here in church, at work, as you go about your business. And as you are consciously self-aware of how you view those around you, try and establish on what occasions or in what circumstances you are guilty of showing favoritism, of making these distinctions on the basis of appearance. And as you identify the occasions when you are guilty, then I would encourage you to repent of that and to, with God's help, to change, and to no longer make those kind of prejudice and discriminatory conclusions and judgments that result in action. So, there's a task for all of us in this week that has begun, a task for those of us who, as James describes us, are believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father,