

Grace Anglican Network, sermon for Sunday 3rd April 2020

James 2:1-13, “Mercy Triumphs Over Judgement”

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Roughly a decade ago, when my first niece was born (the first grandchild to be born in our family), I travelled up to Darwin to see her a few times in those early years, and we formed a pretty strong bond that remains to this day. And I used to call her my favourite niece. “Where’s my favourite niece?” I’d say. And, of course, as the *only* niece in the family at that time, that was entirely appropriate to say, and it was my way of affirming just how special Tahlia was to me. And I think she got it.

But then fast-forward a couple of years, and another little niece arrived in the family and, well, I had to change my language. Either I stopped calling Tahlia my favourite, or perhaps more to the point, I now had *two* favourite nieces. But either way, it would have been unkind (and untrue) to just go on treating Tahlia as the favourite. And you can imagine if I did that, the impact it might have had over time, on my relationship with my other niece! It sends a pretty horrible message, doesn’t it.

We joke about it sometimes, referring to one sibling as the favourite or the “golden child” but really, if that stuff’s taken to heart, it can be quite damaging for people. They may struggle with feelings of not measuring up to parental expectations, or of living in the shadow of a sibling, or at worst of not being loved. Some people carry that pain with them all their lives.

No, favouritism, when you think about, really has no place in a loving and secure home. And yet, it is many peoples’ experience.

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It occurred to me this week that James (the writer of this book in the bible) could possibly have been the victim of some favouritism in his own childhood! You might know that James (our author) was in fact the biological half-brother of Jesus Christ (quite a claim to fame, really). And I'm not doubting the integrity of Mary and Joseph as parents, but as the parent of a toddler myself, I reckon it'd be pretty hard (at least sometimes) not to favour the child who never sinned, right? Not once. And the child who perfectly obeyed the fifth Commandment in the Mosaic Law to "honour your father and mother." Hard not to favour that child just a little, I reckon!

But James isn't talking about that here. He's not revisiting some childhood wound. He's talking about the church.

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Our passage begins (v. 1), "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus?"

What a question! Right away James is connecting *favouritism* (in the church) with the one indispensable thing for us in the Christian life - our *belief* (or faith) in the Lord Jesus. And the suggestion here is that acts of favouritism within the church, among the fellowship of believers, are actually in some way a sign of *un*-belief. Do you see that? This is pretty serious stuff. "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism *really believe* in our glorious Lord Jesus?"

And James goes on to give an example that to our minds, might seem pretty extreme. A rich man walks into a church gathering wearing gold jewelry and fine clothes - and he gets the special treatment. I mean, the welcoming team zero in on this guy. They're all over him. He gets ushered to the good seats. He then gets warmly embraced by a good number of folks during the "Meet & Greet" time (to the minister's great relief!). And then after the service, he gets invited to join a

smaller group of regulars for lunch at a nice place up the road. This man's been welcomed well - or has he? In some ways, that depends on what happens next.

And James tells us ...

Same church gathering. Maybe even the same day. Another man walks in. This man's poor. He's disheveled. We might assume he's a bit smelly, and that he has a few "social quirks." And if you had to sum it up, you might say that this guy gets *tolerated*. No one asks him to leave, but no one gives him any indication that they really want him to stay either. In fact, the man's perceptive enough to read between the lines. He's a little confused, actually, because he'd heard that Jesus had a message of hope, *for all*, no matter what your circumstances in life, or what mistakes you'd made, that somehow the Christian faith held out mercy and love.

But it's clear he's not going to get that here. He feels judged by some, and invisible to others. And he didn't come to church looking to just be tolerated. He can get that anywhere.

This is an obvious example, in a way. It's overt. It's crude. It's pretty brutal, actually. And most of us (who are regulars at church) would shudder to think that this could happen in one of *our* gatherings. But I think we're to assume that it does. In some form, it does.

The truth of the matter is that all of us have been conditioned from a young age to practice favouritism - which is just the more polite term for what James later describes (in v. 4) as "becoming judges with evil thoughts." This is what we do, in our natural state. We tend to judge people with evil thoughts. Have you noticed that? It's the art of measuring people up. And it's not your most endearing quality (or mine!), but we can be pretty good at it.

And what we tend to do is favour (or honour) those people who we perceive to be adding some value to our lives. These are the people we *want* around, because

they are (quite literally) *worth* something to us – it sounds harsh to put it like that, I know, but that’s what favouritism is.

And the flipside to favouritism is discrimination. If we favour those people who in our judgement “measure-up” (in some way), then naturally we’ll withhold favour from those who don’t – because they’re not worth as much to us. Discrimination is the ugly flipside to favouritism.

And, of course, it doesn’t have to have anything to do with material wealth. Acts of favouritism can take many forms, and yes, they can be subtle – though it rarely feels subtle (I’m sure), if you’re the one being discriminated against.

And so, we need to think carefully about what favouritism might look like in our church. And ask, who’s getting the special treatment? And who’s being neglected? And why. And we may well need to repent at points here. I take it, that is what James is urging us to consider.

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And in the second part of the passage (vv. 8-13), James puts this issue (of favouritism) in the context of God’s Law. And it would be great to study this section in more detail in our small groups this week. But in essence, James is saying here that when it comes to “loving your neighbour as yourself”, which every Christian is called to do, the moment we get selective about who our neighbour is, we’ve missed the point. Actually, James is a bit more direct than that. He says (in v. 9), “We’ve committed sin and have been convicted by God’s Law as transgressors.” He even (kind of) lumps our acts of favouritism in with committing adultery and even murder (v. 11) – it might sound a bit dramatic to us, but James is trying to wake us up to the seriousness, indeed the *evil* that lies behind favouritism. It really has no place at all in the family of God.

Jesus said, "If you love those who love you, so what? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, well okay, but even sinners will do that too." [paraphrase] No, our love of neighbour must extend all the way up to (and including) even our enemies.

That is Christ-like love. It's not selective. There's no measuring up.

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The truth about favouritism (of the kind James is talking about) is that it dishonours everyone in the equation. We dishonour ourselves (if we're the ones committing the favouritism), it clearly dishonours the person being discriminated against, it dishonours God, and actually it also dishonours the person who's become the object of our favour - because in the end, haven't we have judged them too, with evil thoughts? Because our acts of favour (our so-called "love") has been determined not ultimately by who that person is before God, but on what they offer *us*. Or in James' example, on what they could do for our church! Do you see?

And friends, if God treated us that way, we would all be in serious trouble. Our self-serving acts of favouritism alone would be enough to put us at odds with our Maker. But in Jesus, God has shown us another way.

Do we have God's favour? In Christ, yes we do! God's favour has been showered upon us, but not because we measured up, and not because we came to God with the kind of talent or credentials he's looking for - but only because in the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, God's mercy triumphed over his judgement, so that you and I can (today) walk forgiven and free, enjoying the unmerited favour of God forever.

That's the good news for us, if we come humbly to Christ, we are adopted into God's family *by his mercy and grace alone*. And then (Scripture says elsewhere), "From now on, we treat no one according to the flesh (or by worldly standards) anymore." And how could we? How could we continue to make evil judgments and demands of others to measure up, when *we* have encountered the sheer mercy of God in Jesus Christ, and fallen upon his grace?

This is why James is so direct and confrontational with us. Favouritism is opposed to the kingdom of God. It is incoherent to a life of following Jesus. It doesn't make sense, anymore. But it's one way that Satan loves to mess with the church. And so, James is calling it out here. And we should listen.

If you know Christ today, then your life testifies to the glorious reality that *in him*, God's mercy triumphs over judgement. Praise God! But perhaps the question we need to ask ourselves, then, as we think about the many people in our lives, and in our church is: Where have *we* allowed judgement (of others) to triumph over mercy? And how (with God's help) are we going to we fix it?

Friends (and visitors), may you know the blessing of God's lavish and unmerited favour upon you this week - in Jesus' name. Amen.