

Equality in the Church

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening everyone. Let me echo Graham's welcome to you tonight, whether you're here with us in the building or tuning in online. As has been said, my name is Stuart and I'm one of the Christians that meets here at Brunfield.

And it's my privilege to be taking us through the first half of James chapter 2 tonight. I want to kick us off tonight with just one word. Equality.

I suspect in the last week, for many of us, this will not be the first time that we've heard, read or spoken this word. For me this week, it was when I was watching Scotland thump England nil-nil at the Euros.

And during the break, there was an advert that was repeated again and again, promoting football as an equal game. It goes far beyond sport though, doesn't it?

And in terms of issues being raised by our society right now, you may not find another hotter topic. Is the issue current? Yes.

[1 : 05] Is the issue new? No. In our passage tonight, James directly addresses the issue of equality. Not in sport, or in workplaces, or in society in general, but in the church.

It's remarkable, isn't it? To so many people, the Bible is just an outdated and irrelevant book. And yet, here we are tonight with a passage like this in front of us.

I fully believe that what God has to say through James in these verses is as current and as relevant to us tonight as it was when it was written to these churches over 2,000 years ago.

Tonight, as we look at the issue of equality in the church, we're going to split our passage into three sections. And as we go through each one, we're going to see three very different ways of seeing other people.

Seeing from the perspective of the world in verses 1 to 4. Seeing from the perspective of God in verses 5 to 7. And then seeing from the perspective of the law in verses 8 to 13.

[2 : 14] I trust that as we go through this together, we will all be challenged as we consider the question, from what perspective do we see other people in the church?

So in our first section, in verses 1 to 4, we see the perspective of the world. It's clear from these verses that the attitudes of the world and the wisdom of the world, it hadn't taken long to creep into the early church.

James uses an example to prove this. So here we have two men walking into the church. We don't know if they were Christians, but we do know that one is paid attention to and the other is not.

One is given a seat in a good place, the other is not. He's told to stand or to sit at someone else's feet. What point is James trying to get across here with this example?

Is it that the church needs to change who's on the rota for making the seating plans? No. The seats, they weren't actually the issue here. The issue is the way that these two men were treated and the attitude behind it.

[3 : 25] He's making the point that they both walked into the church, and yet they've been treated completely differently, simply because one was rich and well presented and the other was poor with filthy clothes.

James asks him in verse 4, Have you not shown partiality amongst yourself? Partiality carries with it a similar thought to favouritism, or to use another very current word, discrimination.

Let's stop for a minute and just examine why this was going on. There may have been a number of motives behind why this man was treated so differently. We aren't told very much about the men.

The rich one, he may have been a prominent figure in the area, a successful businessman, or from a family of great influence perhaps. Whoever he was, the congregation, they quickly worked out that it was in their interest to treat this man well.

Maybe they thought if they treated him well, he would be extra generous with a collection box when it came round at the end. Or maybe they thought he would be able to promote them and use his influence in the local area.

[4 : 41] These are pretty logical thoughts, are they not? Here's someone who can benefit us, so let's make sure he is well looked after. Let's roll out the red carpet, so to speak.

The problem is that this is exactly how the world thinks, and its motive is selfish. I'm sure in our lives we've all heard sayings like, you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.

Or, you owe me one. The idea of course is that after we do a good thing for someone, then we expect them to do something good back in return. This worldly perspective, it seems to have been the mindset of the churches here when deciding how to treat people when they walk through their doors.

What can they give us if we treat them well? Unfortunately for the poor man, because he had seemingly little to offer, he was treated as a second-class citizen.

And the mindset was, why would we waste one of our best seats in the house on a man like this? To give the lack of seating situation a wee bit of cultural context, as we know from our studies so far, the letter of James, it was written to Jewish Christians.

[5 : 59] Now these early Christians, they were steeped in Jewish traditions, and so many of the things that went along with Judaism had crept in to the early church. This was a big issue, and it's addressed in many passages throughout the New Testament, and even a whole book, the book of Hebrews, is dedicated to showing the people that the new covenant through the blood of Jesus had superseded the old covenant through Moses and the law.

In this particular case, the thing that had crept in was preferential treatment. In synagogues back then, and I believe in some today, there were places of honour given to the people of importance.

These would be benches right at the front and centre of the synagogue. So to use here as an example, we'll keep the two benches in front of me here, and then we'll just strip the rest away.

And then next week, the welcome team can have the job of deciding who gets to sit on the benches and who gets to sit on the floor. So here we have, quite literally, everyone walking into the church, getting judged at the door.

Were they worthy, or were they not worthy? This is what is going on here. In James, he doesn't hold back with what he says in the second half of verse 4. He doesn't say, this isn't a kind of way to treat people.

[7 : 23] He tells them, in unmistakably clear language, that they become judges with evil thoughts. Telling the churches what they were doing was evil.

Strong words indeed. But we have to see that God treats the subject of equality in the church very seriously. And so for us, as the children of God, we ought to do the same.

This world, it can so easily influence us with the way that it thinks. You know, when you go into a large enough plane, when you either turn left if you have a first class ticket, or for most of us, we'll turn right and go into the economy class.

When you go to a football or a rugby stadium, in the main stand, right at the centre of the pitch, you'll see the corporate section. This will be where all the family of the players, the people high up at the club, the gold season ticket holders, etc.

This will be where they sit. And then you look up far high into the stands, right up in the corners, and the seats where you can hardly see the players, you're so far away from the pitch.

[8 : 32] Or, you maybe go to a concert or the theatre, and you have the seats that are right at the front row, or you maybe even have the boxes, and you have the seats then at the back that are behind the pillars with the obstructed view.

In so many situations in life, we experience people not being treated equally. The seemingly most important are those that have paid the most receive the better treatment than everyone else.

This is the way that the world operates. What James is saying here is that when it comes to the church, there is not to be a first class section or a VIP area in sight.

everyone is to be treated the same way, as equals. Friends, we must always remember that when we come together as a people of God, we need to be so careful to leave the perspective of this world the way that it thinks, the way that it treats people, outside the door where it belongs.

Let's now move on to see what God has to say on the matter. In our next section in verses 5 to 7, if we've just seen the selfish perspective of the world, let's see what the perspective of God is.

[9 : 50] If you read with me the words of verse 5, it says, has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he promised those who love him?

But you have dishonoured the poor man. Throughout the Bible, God very often chooses the weak and the poor to do his work. We'll only have to look at the story of King David as an example. The prophet Samuel, he asked David's dad, Jesse, to bring all his sons before him so he could anoint the one that God had chosen to be king. Out the seven sons came, no doubt all strong and able men.

But one by one, God said to Samuel, nope, it's not him. Nope, not him either. Samuel says to Jesse, is this them all? And Jesse says, well no, there is one more, my youngest son David. Jesse had left them out in the field to look after the sheep, not thinking for a second that God would have chosen the young lad David to be king. And yet, that's exactly what God had done.

[10 : 56] A few chapters later and we see this same young lad David defeating a mighty giant, Goliath, in front of both the armies of Israel and the Philistines, proclaiming the name of God.

This is just one example, but time and time again, God does this. He chooses the seemingly most insignificant people and he does great things through them for his glory.

So no matter how, no matter who you are, listen to this tonight, how insignificant you may feel, God is able and God is willing to work through you.

Not only that, God loves you more than you can possibly imagine. There's no one too poor, there's no one too weak, there's no one too bad, there's no one too unimportant for the love of God.

The Bible makes it very clear that the love of God goes out to all. A verse in 1 John says this, this is love, not that we love God, but that he loved us and he sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

[12 : 08] If you're a Christian, then I hope that is an encouragement to you. This world may beat you down and tell you that you're nobody, but in God's eyes, you're someone and you're someone special to him.

If you're not a Christian, then I pray that you would come and experience the love of God for yourself. A love so great that it caused the Lord Jesus to go to the cross and take the punishment that we deserved so that you could have your sins forgiven and you could be made right with God. Going back to our passage, why is it that God is so angry with what's going on here in the churches? It's because these poor people who are being treated like second class citizens, they are loved dearly by him.

And God demands that those that are loved dearly by him are treated as they ought to be. For us today, that means that no matter who comes into our church building, we are to treat them as Jesus would have done, with love and with care.

The service of the welcome team is a very valuable one, but this can't just be left for the welcome or leadership team to do. Showing the love and care of God to those who he brings amongst us is all of our responsibility.

[13 : 31] The Lord Jesus, when he was here, he was called the friend of sinners because he used to spend so much time with people that society wanted nothing to do with. A tax collector who was the most despised profession, tax collector was the most despised profession in Jewish society.

A tax collector was chosen to be a disciple of Jesus. He was called Matthew and he wrote the first book of our New Testament. Jesus was here to save the lost and that meant everyone, whether they were rich or whether they were poor, from the rulers to the beggars in the street.

The Lord Jesus himself, he was born into a poor family. Mary and Joseph, they weren't people of any wealth or great influence. As well as being known as the carpenter's son, Jesus also grew up in a place called Nazareth.

Nazareth was a place that we're told it was despised and it was looked down upon by other people in the region. Jesus knew then and he knows now exactly what it's like to be treated poorly because it had been from humble circumstances.

It's no wonder then that it brings such sadness to God's heart to see discrimination against the poor going on in his church. The poor and the lowly undoubtedly they have a special place in the heart of God.

[15 : 03] But those that are rich and have power they are loved by him too. But the rich they certainly don't get a good mention in verses 6 and 7. As we know these Jewish Christians have been driven out of their country because of the ongoing persecution from those in power.

James, he makes the point in these verses that they're pandering to the rich and the powerful at the expense of the poor and yet at the same time it was the rich and the powerful that were persecuting them.

I also it is true that there are comparatively few rich and powerful people who come to follow God. However, we are thankful that there are some who are saved and just like the poor God loves and God is able to work mightily through them.

I also need to say at this point that what we are looking at tonight treating people equally in the church is not just applicable to rich and to poor.

Churches, they have an amazing mix of people so different in so many ways and yet brought together by a shared love for Jesus. whether it's wealth or appearance, education, age, race, gender, political views, whatever differences we may have, we must always remember that in God's eyes we are equals as brothers and sisters.

[16 : 33] our differences there should never be a reason to drive us apart. In fact, they should be celebrated as they give us an opportunity to show to the world what being a church family really means.

A community where people of all ages with many different backgrounds and interests come together to worship God united as one in our love for him.

Jesus said, a new commandment I give you love one another as I have loved you so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

This doesn't mean that we aren't without distinction in the church family. There are many other passages that talk about the different gifts, roles and responsibilities within the church.

I think the image of the body of Christ is particularly useful here. A hand has a different role to an eye and yet both are equally important for the body to function.

[17 : 45] So it is with the church. Many different parts but we're all equally part of the body of Christ. Before we move on to our last section, as we've considered the perspective of God, we have to conclude that the selfish perspective of this world has no place in the church.

In fact, we are to think the complete opposite way. Lord Jesus, he tells us in the Gospel of Luke that if we treat someone well hoping for good to be done back to us in return, then that will be our only reward.

However, if we do good to others hoping for nothing in return, then we will be rewarded by God for our actions. So not only are we to avoid seeking out those who will repay our goodness, but we are to cherish the opportunities to do good to those who cannot repay us.

We do find it easier to show love and care to those people who we get on with though, don't we? It's to those who we don't get on with as well that we can sometimes struggle to show God's love and care to.

Let's be open here. We're not going to get on equally as well with everyone in the church. There will be some people who we will naturally be more friendly with than others.

[19 : 11] However, if we only show love and care and do good to the people who we get on with then, and not to others, then we are showing favouritism and we're not treating people equally as God would have us.

The same passage in Luke, it says that even sinners show love to those who love them in return. As Christians, we're to be different and to love in an unconditional way just like the Lord Jesus did.

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. when we think of fellow Christians who we may find it harder to love, I think this saying sums it up well.

If God the Father chose him, if God the Son died for them, if God the Spirit lives in them, then I can love them.

what a contrast to the thinking of the world. This is the challenge for our heart tonight. Do we see others in the way that God sees them?

[20 : 24] Our final section from verses 8 through to 13, we see the perspective of the law. So if you read with me in verses 8 and 9, it says, if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbour as yourself, then you do well.

But if you show partiality, then you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. So here, James tells the churches that if they show favouritism, then they're breaking the command to love their neighbour as themselves.

Jesus himself, he spoke at length about what it means to love our neighbour. When his disciples, they asked him directly, he told them the story of the good Samaritan, the one who looked after the Jewish man who was attacked by the thieves.

The Samaritan, he had no reason to show love and to show care to this man and yet that's exactly what he did. He treated him the same way that he would wish to be treated himself.

That's exactly the point that James is making here. How can you say you're loving your neighbour as yourself? How can you say that you're treating people the way in which you would wish to be treated when you're judging others based on their wealth and based on their appearance?

[21 : 47] The religious Jews, they loved going through the law and telling God how righteous they were because of the laws that they managed to keep. You shall not murder. Well, no problems there.

You shall not commit adultery. Yep, find me that one too. You shall not steal. Wow, three out of three. God must really be pleased with me. Well, we have to realise that the law is not some sort of school exam where seven out of ten gets you an A, six out of ten gets you a B.

It doesn't work like that. The law required that every single thing was to be done perfectly or else the whole law would be broken, even something as seemingly small as partiality or favouritism.

We can sometimes be like that, like the religious Jews though, can't we? We can put emphasis on what we see as more important teachings to follow.

Surely, if I'm telling others about Jesus and reading my Bible and praying, then a small thing like a bit of favouritism will be overlooked. There's a saying, isn't there, when someone gets pulled up for something that they think there's been an overreaction for.

[23 : 02] They say, well, I haven't killed anyone, have I? Well, if that's our attitude, then, when it comes to treating people equally, then we need to ask ourselves, why has James put this section about the law in here?

I believe it's because he wants his readers then and he wants us here tonight to see that in the eyes of the law, we were all the same. Whether you'd broken only one or two commandments or whether you'd broken them all, it all resulted in the same thing, that he had broken the law of God.

As Christians, it's true that we are no longer under the law of Moses. However, apart from the fourth commandment regarding the Sabbath, all the other ones are repeated in similar forms in the New Testament as teachings of Jesus.

So for us today, the law still has the same effect that it shows us just how far short of God's perfect standard we are. In the context of our passage tonight though, James is saying that since we have all fallen short, how can we possibly justify seeing some people as better than others and some people as worse than others?

In terms of our standing before God, it is impossible for any of us to have been made right with God if it wasn't for the Lord Jesus and what he did for us.

[24 : 29] It doesn't matter how rich or how powerful someone might be, they're a sinner just like the beggar in the street. If we are a Christian, then the law reminds us, no matter who we are, that we were once equally lost and we're now all equally saved.

So as we draw to our close, let's re-ask ourselves the question that we had right at the start. From what perspective do we see other people in the church? The world?

Think on what we can get in return for our good actions? God, a love that goes out no matter who they are? Or the law? That we are all sinners and fall short of God's standard?

We've seen how seriously God takes the issue of equality in the church and that there's no justification for treating people differently because of any distinctions between us. On a personal note, it does, it makes me sad that so many people including some of my friends and colleagues feel that they would be judged the second they walk through a church door.

Regrettably, in some cases they would be correct. However, in my wife Amy and I's experience, churches, including this one, have been some of the most welcoming places we've ever been in.

[25 : 59] I believe that if we strive to see others as God sees them, then our churches will be places where no matter who walks through the door, they will feel the love of God shown towards them and that amongst the church family, there will be a wonderful unity as part of the body of Christ and as a gathering of people saved only by the grace of God.

Let's pray. Our God and Father, we come before you tonight and we just want to thank you once again for the Lord Jesus.

We recognise fully that there was nothing we could have done to ever merit favour with yourself. It was only because of the Lord Jesus and what he did that we can sit here and be called the family of God.

We thank you for that privilege that it is that we can be brothers and sisters and we can address you as Father. We thank you for what we've been looking at tonight.

We thank you for what you've brought before us and we do pray for ourselves that we would not be influenced by this world and that the way it thinks, we pray that our motives would not be selfish when we look to others.

[27 : 21] We pray that we would be filled with your thinking and we pray that we'd have that desire to think more and more like how you think God and Father.

We just pray that we would see others in the way that you would have us see them as those that are loved dearly by you. And so we just ask this for ourselves that you would leave this on our hearts that we would all each and every one have to examine where we stand on this and that we might be challenged by what has been said.

And we just thank you once again for your goodness to us and your Son and what he has done for us. We just thank you once again for this time in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.