

3. True Christian Faith: Loves its Neighbour

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[0 : 01] There has been one occasion in my life when I have sat in the executive lounge in Heathrow Airport. I was travelling back from London and in the security queue, as one does when you're in a very long queue, I was looking around.

And the man behind me seemed familiar. I think I'd seen him once before in person, but I'd certainly read about him in the paper. So I turned around and I said to him, very pleased to meet you, I'm Euan Dodds. Are you Alex Salmond?

And he said, yes I am. And we had a very pleasant conversation. And we got to the front of the queue and he said, I've got half an hour before my plane comes, would you like to come and sit in the lounge with me?

And we can keep talking. And I said, I'd be very happy to. So we sat down, we had an orange juice, and I'm sorry to see we spoke about completely inconsequential things. And after 20 minutes he left for his plane.

But I was left in this lounge. And I looked around and I thought this is a far cry from the EasyJet Terminal. There's people giving away juice, there's free newspapers, there's comfortable leather sofas.

[1 : 06] What a wonderful place to be. Sadly, one and only visit. But it demonstrates a principle. That typically in life, there is preferential treatment for the rich.

The wealthier you are, the better people will treat you. It was true in the executive lounge. It was true on the plane. Pay a little bit extra, you can sit in first class. It's true in healthcare.

If you pay your taxes, you can join the NHS queue. But if you're willing to pay a little bit more, you can skip the queue and go private. Typically, the wealthier you are, the better you are treated.

And unfortunately, that attitude had carried over into the church in James' day. People were coming in, and the rich were being treated very well. Being shown into first class.

But the poor were being kept at the back of the church. Relegated to economy. And James says this is a very serious matter. It reflects, firstly, our attitude to each other, but moreover, our attitude to the Lord himself.

[2 : 11] The Lord of glory. And so, in these 13 verses, he picks up that idea, and he develops it. And he explains to the believers how they are to treat one another, and the guests who come into their church.

And James, as we've seen in previous weeks, is a very practical preacher. His concern is that the people of God be mature. Firstly, that their faith be proven genuine.

And then they progress and mature onto perfection as Christians. In chapter 1, we learned that God is able to use the trials and difficulties of life to strengthen and develop our faith, and to lead us on to maturity.

And last week, we saw that Christian maturity is intricately tied up with the Word of God. We need to be those who listen to the Word of God. Spending time each day reading it for ourselves.

Coming together congregationally to hear it preached. And having heard it, we need to dwell on it. We need to do it. To put it into action. And James explained that the kind of religion that is acceptable to God is marked by our conversation, which is pure, by a loving concern for other people, and by a progressive growth in holiness.

[3 : 30] And this week, he goes on to describe our relationships within the church. How we are to treat one another, and how we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. And in verses 1 to verse 4, he gives us a scene.

A scene we can well imagine. We are told of two men. And he draws our attention to their appearance. The first man, verse 2, is wearing a gold ring.

Quite literally, he is gold-fingered. And he has fine clothing. Splendid clothing. Bright clothing. Magnificent, sumptuous clothing. The word could be translated. And the second man comes in. And we are told he is wearing shabby clothing. Filthy clothing. You can imagine the difference, can't you?

Maybe tonight, over coffee, two people come in. One comes in the left door. And he has his Gucci shoes. His Hugo Boss suit. They are mani tie. The Dolce & Gabbana shades.

[4 : 30] And a leather briefcase. He comes in the left. And at the right-hand door, another man comes in. Unshaven. The smell of alcohol in his breath. A dirty cagoule.

Torn trousers. Grubby trainers. Who do you gravitate towards? Well, the Christians of James' day, verse 3, gravitated towards the finely dressed man.

You sit here in a good place. Come to the front of the church where everyone can see you. Let us treat you well. And the poor man, you stand over there. Sit down at my feet.

And James says this is a very serious issue. It's not simply a matter of appearance. It's not simply a matter of hygiene. Their behaviour looks to undermine the very gospel itself.

Look at the words he uses. Chapter 2, verse 1. Partiality. Favoritism. He uses the word. He talks about discriminating between themselves.

[5 : 34] Verse 4. Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves? And the word he uses is the same word to describe the double-minded man. You remember in chapter 1 he says, when you pray, pray in faith, not being double-minded, not being inconsistent in your approach to God.

And here he tells people that they are being inconsistent in their relationships with one another. They are showing favoritism. They are discriminating. And in verse 4, they are setting themselves up as judges with evil thoughts.

And the point of the gospel is this. That in God's eyes, there is no favoritism. There is no discrimination between individuals on the basis of appearance, or wealth, or gender, or race.

But they all have fallen short of the glory of God. And all are justified freely by his grace. The people of James' day had forgotten that. And it was not an easy lesson to learn.

You recall Peter, the apostle, we were thinking about this issue this morning, the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the early church. And there was Peter having spent three years with Christ.

[6 : 51] And one day he was on the roof of a house, and he had a vision. In fact, he had it three times, where he saw various foods descending from heaven. And he was told to kill and eat.

And he said, surely not, Lord. I have never eaten anything unclean. Three times the vision came to him. And as he was thinking about this, there was a knock at the door. And some men had come, sent by an Italian soldier.

And they said, just the other day, an angel appeared, and told us to come and visit you, because you have something to say to us. It seems God had something to say to Peter. And so he went with these men, and he came to the house of Cornelius, who was a soldier, and more than that, he was a Gentile soldier, part of the Italian regiment.

And Peter began to preach the gospel to them. And when he opened his mouth, in Acts chapter 10, verse 34, he said this, truly I understand that God shows no partiality, no favoritism, but in every nation, anyone who fears him, and does what is right, is acceptable to him.

God does not discriminate on the grounds of race. And a few chapters later, of course, the apostles gather in the Council of Jerusalem to discuss this question, the relationship of Jews and Gentiles.

[8 : 12] And Peter, fresh from this experience, stands up, and he says, Brothers, you know that in the early days, God made a choice among you, that by my mouth, the Gentiles should hear the word of God, and believe.

And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. And he made no distinction, between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith, God shows no favoritism, God makes no distinction.

And yet the Christians in James' church were doing just that, showing favoritism to the rich, and making distinction between those who came in, who was to be honored in the church, who was to be dishonored, who was to be given the prominent seat, and who was to be told to wait at the front door.

They had forgotten, as we read this morning, that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. They were one in Christ Jesus.

No distinction. And unfortunately, of course, it wasn't just James' church that believed that, or forgot that. It's been forgotten all throughout Christian history.

[9 : 38] If you go to Versailles, the Palace of Versailles, very splendid, building far more splendid than Heathrow Airport, there is a wonderful chapel, lovely Baroque chapel, full of marble and paintings, and all this sort of stuff.

And you'll notice it's built over two levels. The ground floor was where the servants would go to worship. And the second level was where the king and his entourage would go to worship. Distinction. It's not much different, actually, from the pew rentals that used to be employed in Scotland, where the more money you paid, of course, the more prominent and the bigger a pew you were given in the church.

Distinctions on the basis of wealth. And the issue of distinctions on the basis of race has never really gone away. Under apartheid, in South Africa, of course, the churches were separated. You weren't permitted to go to one or other church. If you were an African, a black African, you couldn't go to a white church. And vice versa. Of course, apartheid is officially with us no longer. But when you travel to America, you realize that in some parts, segregation is still very much alive and well.

[10 : 47] Especially in the South. Distinctions being made on the basis of appearance. Now, of course, in this church, we have a range of individuals and people from all sorts of different nations.

But do we make distinctions in our hearts? Do we show favoritism and partiality? Do we only speak to the people we want to speak to? Or do we speak to the people we'd really rather not speak to? Do we only extend invitations to people we want to speak to or people we have something in common with? Or do we look out for the person and perhaps invite them to our home or meet them for a coffee?

The person with whom we have very little in common. And the person who might never reciprocate something to us. Do we show distinction? But by way of encouragement, I must say, friends, that however the welcome was in James' church, I have heard it said on many occasions, and I often receive many emails to this effect, that the welcome here is very warm.

I often on a Monday morning, it's always interesting to see who writes to you on a Monday morning, but more than once, I have received an email, usually from an overseas student, who has said, thank you and your church so much for the warm welcome we received.

[12 : 06] Perhaps at the front door, perhaps from somebody in a pew turning to speak to a stranger, perhaps from somebody inviting them ad hoc to their home. A very warm welcome.

So I encourage you in that respect. Let us continue to show that warm welcome, but let us not show favoritism or discriminate. You see, the problem with their judgment in verse 4 was having made this distinction, that they set themselves up as judges with evil thoughts.

And the nature of human judgment is that typically it gets things wrong. So imagine this situation, which is a real situation that just before Christmas, you happen to be in London, and you're walking along, this particular region, and behind a bin, you see a small group of men bedding down for the night.

They're wearing jeans and hoodies, they're tucking themselves into sleeping bags. There's one young man, he's quite handsome, there's an African fellow next to him, and there's a couple of big lads.

What would you think? Would you think there's a few guys who've fallen on hard times? Would you think there's some chaps, maybe they're wrestling with issues of alcohol or drug addiction?

[13 : 20] Or would you think there is the future King of Great Britain, and his security officer, and the chief executive of a large London charity? Because it was Prince William.

And just before Christmas, he had gone out to spend a night sleeping rough, just to see what it was like. He was the patron of the charity, he wanted to endorse their work. Appearances can be very deceptive, especially the way somebody looks, and the way somebody dresses.

And the Christians in James' day had forgotten that as well. They were looking at appearances, but James says, well, what about this person's heart?

Verse 5. Listen, my beloved brothers. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?

He's not saying that all poor people are automatically saved. But he's saying those who are poor in the world are often those who love God. Their hearts are right before God.

[14 : 25] They seek after God. And in distinction, he says in verse 6, Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court?

Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honourable name by which you were called? The poor love God, and the rich who came into the church were blaspheming the holy name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

And yet it was the rich who were given the best seats and the place of prominence. Something very wrong when we judge by appearances. But it's only natural, isn't it?

And it's often the way that people do judge by appearances. Even so great a saint as Samuel, godly young man, raised in the house of the Lord, and when he was sent by God to go and find a king, he came to the house of Jesse.

And Jesse had his sons, didn't he? Wonderful, strong, athletic sons. And Samuel sees one of them, he looks on Eliab, and he says, Surely the Lord's anointed is before him.

[15 : 30] And God has to rebuke him, and he said to Samuel, Do not look on his appearance, or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees.

Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. The people of James' day had forgotten to look on the heart, and were making judgments, simply on outward appearances. But they had also forgotten God's ultimate purpose. God has chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom.

How often in scripture we see God choosing those who are poor, who are weak, who are small, taking the side of the oppressed, or the bereaved, or the brokenhearted, siding with the outcast. Samuel's mother, Hannah, had this to say, The Lord makes poor and makes rich. He brings low and he exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust.

[16 : 33] He lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, and inherit a seat of honor. God reaches down to pull people out of the heap of ashes, and to seat them in a place of honor.

Paul says the same to the church in Corinth. Think of your calling, my brothers. Not many of you were wise, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

He chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. He chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

God chooses the poor of this world, the poor in spirit, to demonstrate his grace, and to humble human pride. But they'd forgotten his ultimate purpose, that the poor are to inherit a kingdom, just like Prince William.

Didn't look very impressive, but one day he will inherit a kingdom. Well, so says James will the poor. And the rich might look very splendid now, in their Dolce and Gabbana robes, and their lovely golden rings, as they sit in the church.

[17 : 53] But he makes it very plain in his letter, that that beauty is fading. And in chapter 5, he says this, chapter 5, verse 1, Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.

Your riches have rotted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you. They might have splendid, magnificent clothing now.

Their hands might be decked out in golden rings, but James says it's temporary. And one day your clothes will be eaten by moths, and your gold and silver will be corroded.

Your car will be on the scrap heap. Your house will be knocked down, to make way for a motorway. Your clothes will be in a charity shop, and the wonderful name you have now, will be etched on a gravestone.

Their glory is temporary. But the poor are to inherit a kingdom. They have been given an invitation by Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory himself, to become part of his bride, to attend the wedding feast of the Lamb.

[19 : 03] And we're told in Revelation that there is a great cry, saying, Let us rejoice and exult, and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.

It was granted to her to clothe herself with fine linen, splendid linen, magnificent linen, bright and pure. And it is with more than passing interest, we notice the word is the same.

They might be wearing shabby clothing now, but one day God will give them glorious linen to wear, at the wedding feast of the Lamb. And they will be welcomed into a kingdom.

The description of which we're told is of a city. And the wall of this city was built of jasper.

Revelation 21 tells us, While the city was pure gold, clear as glass, the foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel.

And the twelve gates were twelve pearls. Each of the gates made of a single pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass.

[20 : 14] The rich have fine clothes and gold now, but that'll go. But the shabbily dressed poor man, the man who loves God in his heart, will inherit a kingdom.

He will be dressed in this splendid linen. And he will dance and worship upon streets which are golden, in the very presence of God himself. And yet the believers in James' day said, You're not welcome in this church.

Why don't you stand at the back? They have become judges with evil thoughts. So what then is the attitude?

We are to take if we are not to judge and exclude. How are we to respond? And James moves on to our second point, the law of love and the mercy and justice of God.

Again, he gives us a contrast between two points of view. Verse 8 If you really fulfil the royal law, according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

[21 : 21] You are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law, but fails in one point, has become accountable for all of it.

For he who said, Do not commit adultery, also said, Do not murder. If you do not commit adultery, but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

We have, therefore, the contrast between those who fulfil the royal law, according to scripture, who love their neighbours, as they love themselves, and who are said to be doing well.

And those who show favouritism, who break the royal law, as revealed in scripture, and are, therefore, convicted by the law as transgressors, as sinners.

And our first question, then, is why this particular law is described as the royal one. Why is this?

And it does seem to be that a royal law is a law given by a king.

[22 : 31] This particular command, You shall love your neighbours yourself, is, in fact, found in the Old Testament. It's found in Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 18, in which God tells his people to act fairly with each other and to love their neighbours as themselves.

But it was a law that Christ has particular emphasis on. And you'll remember in Matthew's Gospel where he, the king, comes into his kingdom.

And as he enters into Jerusalem riding upon a donkey, the people realise that a prophecy is being fulfilled. But the king of Israel is returning to his people. and they cry out, Hosanna to the son of David who enters the city.

And having arrived, he moves into the temple where he engages in debate with the rulers of this day. And an expert in the law comes to him and says, Teacher, which is the most important commandment?

And he says in Matthew, chapter 22, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.

[23 : 40] And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

The greatest commandment is to love God with everything that we have. And we saw last week how James exhorts people to obey God, to demonstrate their love and their faith for him in obeying what he has said to them.

But the second greatest command was to love your neighbour as yourself. Showing real, practical care. Showing costly, sacrificial love demonstrated in actions towards one another.

To love our neighbour as we love ourselves. The greatest commandments and not just the commandments themselves but in fact the fulfilment of the entire law and prophets. Jesus went on to say in Matthew 22 on these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

Paul says something similar in Romans 13. He says, all the commandments are summed up in this word. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbour.

[24 : 51] Therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. So when we show partiality we are not fulfilling the law. In fact we are breaking it.

And if you break it at one point, says James, you might as well break it at every single point. Think of your driving test. If you've done one, of course, I look around and I see people who perhaps have never done a driving test.

I did mine last century in 1996 and I wouldn't want to brag but I did get three minor faults. And the driving test is one of these things that you can make faults.

There are faults and they break it into major and minor. You have faults and if you commit them you pass. But they have what are called serious or dangerous faults. And if you make so much as one serious or dangerous fault, that's it.

You fail. So you could take your car, you could drive perfectly, you could reverse neatly around a corner, you could do the best three point turn in the history of the world. But if you come around back into the driving school and clip the cab, that's it.

[26 : 00] Because you have committed a serious or a dangerous fault, you fail outright. And James says it's like that with the law of God. If you break it, you might as well break the whole thing.

If you commit murder but do not commit adultery, it doesn't matter. You've broken the law of God. If you commit adultery but you don't murder, it doesn't matter. You've broken the law of God. How much worse then if you hear the royal law given by Christ the King in Jerusalem to love your neighbour as yourself and rather than obeying it, you disobey it.

You break the law at the point on which the whole law and prophets depend the greatest commandments to love God and to love our neighbour. to hear that and to break it.

To be convicted as a transgressor or a sinner. What James is saying is this. These people were busy judging each other and he says actually it's you who will be judged.

It is you who has broken the law and it is therefore you who depend upon God for mercy, for his grace and his forgiveness to be shown to you as transgressors.

[27 : 14] And if you have received that mercy cannot you then show that mercy to other people? If Christ has forgiven you cannot you then forgive other people?

Or are you unmerciful servants who having been forgiven and pardoned and accepted by God who shows no partiality are you then excluding and discriminating and showing partiality against the people who come into your fellowship?

very striking words. Having received mercy let us be merciful to one another.

So these are strong words that James has to say. Very challenging words. Do we show partiality? Do we discriminate?

Do we show mercy and kindness and love to those who come in who perhaps we might not wish to see but whom we are commanded to love as we love ourselves?

[28 : 17] And friends that kind of love is very visible and it's very powerful. And I've finished just with a short testimony of an instance of this love which sent ripples through not just one life but quite literally thousands.

somebody I came to know as a student who now works full time but in his spare time he directs a charity which cares for and feeds and provides for orphans suffering from HIV AIDS.

The kind of religion James describes as true religion caring for those who have nothing or no one. But this chap has a very interesting testimony because he like the men in James one day wandered into a church just you know walking past decided to come in.

And he sat down rather like you're sitting down just now and a young man just to the side of him just turned round just before the service and said hello smiled at him and said really nice to see you how are you doing?

And that was it. End of conversation. And they went their separate ways at the end of the service.

And this fellow went home that day and he thought about that. That kindness shown to a total stranger who'd wandered into a church.

[29 : 32] He was a very deep thinker this guy. He used to keep a long diary and note down all his thoughts and so on. And he remembered that just at the service there had been announced there would be a student weekend away.

And so the Saturday following he turned up impromptu with a bag and he said any space on the bus and there wasn't. So I think he was put into a car with the pastor or something. And he came on this weekend away and spent the entire time talking and arguing and reasoning and wrestling with

these issues.

And then on Sunday night we went home. And on Monday morning he took up his diary and instead of as usual writing his thoughts and his memories he simply drew a cross next to the date.

Because he had come to know and accept the Lord Jesus Christ for himself as his Lord and his Saviour. And that young man who wished him welcome in the church was just a small link in a golden chain leading to his salvation.

And today that fellow as well as working full time helps direct a national charity and does his work among the orphans of South Africa. A simple act of love a simple indiscriminating welcome when he came into church made him consider seriously the power of the gospel himself and led him to a saving faith in Christ and to develop a true religion a kind that is pleasing to God.

[31 : 01] So I encourage you friends many people do receive a warm welcome here but we must continually be on our guard that we are not showing favouritism and discriminating and we pray that God will give us such generous and abundant hearts that we might love our neighbour both those we get on with and those perhaps we might not otherwise speak to.

Let's pray together. Father we thank you Lord for these words we thank you for your wonderful commandments to love you with all of our hearts and minds and souls and strength and to love our neighbour as ourself.

We ask Lord that as we hear these words we might be very much those who do them that we might seek to put the interests of others above our own that we might seek to pray for one another to inquire as to how we are doing and to think of ways in which we can practically love and care and look after one another.

We ask Lord that we might be those who practice true religion who lead the kind of righteous lives that you require and who are when tested found to be mature and ultimately perfect.

we thank you for our time together and we ask your blessing upon us now in Jesus name. Amen.