

James 2:1-15

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 November 2015

Preacher: Stuart Cashman

[0 : 00] Well, all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with! reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. In! case you're wondering, that is the article one of the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

That is not what I'm preaching on tonight. But it strikes me that that is that there are many things in our society that reveal sin, are there? The idea of sin is kind of very old-fashioned to most people in the streets. But if there's one thing that is sin, then it's prejudice, favoritism, exclusion. We are often told that inclusiveness is a British value and tolerance is a British value, whatever those things mean. And often religion is blamed for violence, for trouble in the world at this weekend is a prime example, isn't it, sadly?

And it's thought that if only people could embrace the UN Declaration of Human Rights and live that out, the world would be a better place. Religion is the scourge so often, isn't it, in people's minds. And so as we come to James chapter 2 verse 1, it's perhaps one of those verses in the Bible that many people in our society would say amen to. Or at least the first half of it, anyway. My brothers, show no partiality. If they stop there, people would be quite happy, wouldn't they? It's like the words of Jesus, do not judge others. Even a group like REN, the American group, can sing, I can't say that I love Jesus, that would be a hollow claim. But do not judge others, lest you be judged. What a beautiful refrain, they say. So people like that, don't they? They like the idea of not showing favoritism, not showing impartiality. And we get what James describes here, the situation in a church where the rich people are welcomed in and the poor are disregarded. And we'd like to hope that wouldn't be, wouldn't be in practice if people came to IPC healing, didn't we? And our children gave a good answer when I asked them that question. But James goes further than that. He's not just commanding we don't behave like that. He's commanding them to actually become more Christian in a way when we look at other people. He says, when we look at James chapter 2, he doesn't say, be more inclusive, be more tolerant. He doesn't even say, treat people equally, because we're all made equal. He could say that. In chapter 3 he comes closer, chapter 3 verse 9, where he loots the fact that all people are made in God's image. But what James is saying, he goes deeper than that. He isn't merely after a change in behavior, saying treat people more fairly. Rather he's calling us and his readers to examine our hearts, to see why we behave the way we do. Like an excellent doctor, he's saying, if you are treating people with partiality, it's actually a sign of a deeper disease. It's a symptom of deeper disease. And he wants to get to the root of that problem. So in verse 4, he does get to the root of the problem. He shows us what partiality and favoritism, where it comes from. In verses 5-11 he gives us a few reasons why it's particularly wrong for Christians to behave in that way. And finally in verses 12 and 13, he takes us to a solution. Kind of an unexpected solution in some ways, but a solution nonetheless. Let's look at the heart of the problem first. As James is writing this, he's writing into a culture that, even more than our own, respected people of wealth and high status and high standards. I don't know if you've watched Downton Abbey, or you have watched it. I'm afraid I'm a fan, I like it, I'm that kind of person. But if you've watched it, then you'll know, back in the 20s in England, in high society, people were very deferent still to those in high society. Think of Carson the Butler, horrified that anyone should treat Lord Grantham with anything but the utmost respect. If that means nothing to you, don't worry. But it was a bit like that in James' day. And yet James wants to show that this is a problem.

And you look at this critique carefully, verse 4. If you've treated the poor badly and the rich well, verse 4, have you not made distinctions among yourself and become judges with evil thoughts?

[4 : 15] Now it's obvious that if you've treated the rich one way and the poor another way, you have made a distinction. But I think James is actually saying something deeper than this. That word translated distinction here is the same word that James has already used across the column back in

chapter 1, verse 6. The very same context, we'll just go back to verse 5 for a second.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God and gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith with no doubting, with no division in his mind, no distinction is the way that word is translated in chapter 2. For the one who doubts, the one who has a distinction in his mind, the one who has a division in his mind, is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. That person does not suppose he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. See, James says in chapter 1, if you're doubting, if you're divided in your mind, and what you think about God and whether you can answer your prayer, you're a double-minded man. You're suffering from spiritual schizophrenia.

You're saying one thing but believing another. So it's interesting he uses the same word here. If there's a division in your thinking, if you're claiming, verse 1, to hold the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you're divided in the way you're treating people, then it shows there's actually a division in your heart. It shows you're a double-minded person. You are actually holding the faith with integrity. So you can translate verse 4 of chapter 2 like this. If you treat the rich man and the poor man differently in this way, then have you not been divided within yourselves, within each one of you? Are you not behaving in a double-minded manner? And to spell out further how serious that is, look at what James says at the end of the verse. If you're doing this, have you not become judges with evil thoughts?

So James is calling a spade a spade. He's not saying it's a bit intolerant and a bit exclusive if you treat people differently. He's saying you're becoming a judge with evil thoughts.

That's what you're being. So James is really saying the reason you are discriminating against people is that actually you're not being Christian enough. The solution is to actually hold your faith with integrity, to really trust Jesus as Lord. To verse 1, show no partiality as you hold the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now as we read James' description of the church in verses 2 and 3, I think it's easy to think, well we wouldn't do that in this church, would we? We wouldn't treat the rich one way and the poor another. I suspect we wouldn't. But actually how often in our own hearts do we hold prejudices and do we actually treat people differently, albeit subtly? I was walking down the street this week, thinking about these verses, I was preparing this sermon. I thought, what are some of my prejudices? And as I've been praying more showly, in the next minute, first of all, a guy cycled up a pavement towards me.

[7 : 28] And being a cyclist, and being self-righteous, I immediately went to him, how could he cycle up a pavement? I would never do that. I really realised, okay, there is one of my prejudices. I think I'm such a nice guy, I wouldn't do this. So I frowned on the man who does. And as if that wasn't enough, 20 seconds later, walking up the pavement behind him, was a lady smoking away, and as she walked past, I thought to myself, what a disgusting habit, because I hate the smell, and because I've never been tempted to do it. Oh dear, immediately, straight away, two of the Stuart's prejudices leap out. As you hold the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, do not show partiality.

And yet bias and partiality and judgement, they're part of our human makeup, aren't they? How does it play out in other ways? As Christians, we often still behave in ways that show favoritism to some, don't we? So don't we love it when we hear about some sports star somewhere who has professed faith in Christ? Oh great, we can wheel them out and show us some credibility in being a Christian. You can be a Christian at a sports star. Don't we love that person?

Or at work? We find out that a partner in our firm, or a senior manager is a Christian. Aren't we excited as someone we can look up to? And yet we don't so easily overlook the Christian security guard, or the Christian cleaner? Isn't that showing partiality, like James tells us not to? Or how often have I heard people say to me, I went to the Christian Union school once, or the Christian Union University, but I didn't really like it because they were all nerdy. I didn't want to go back. Well I can understand that. I was really involved in the Christian Union School and of the University, and I was a nerd, I still am. But actually when we say that, we don't want to associate with those people because they're people other people that look down on. When we look up to the sports star or the senior manager, and look down on the cleaner, all the nerds in the Christian Union, are we showing partiality?

Are we viewing people the way the world views them, not the way Jesus views them? It's actually hard for us to see past status, isn't it? Or attractiveness, or celebrity, or importance to the world's eyes, or wealth. That's why we need to heave verse 1. My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. Notice the phrase there, the Lord of glory?

Jesus isn't called back anywhere else in the New Testament.

Why does James use that phrase? He says, when we catch the glory of the Lord Jesus, then all the things this world values pale into insignificance, don't they? What is a celebrity sports car or a hip kid at school compared to the majestic, glorious Lord Jesus? How can we judge by a worldly standard if we're holding faith in this majestic King? So here's the root of the problem, James says. When we're judging others, when we're showing partiality, we're actually being double-minded. We're not keeping our eyes and our faith on who Jesus is and who he has made us by his grace. We're not single-mindedly holding the faith. So he's shown us the root of the problem. He then goes on to give us some reasons why it's so wrong to show partiality.

[10 : 55] They're not the reasons that the UN Declaration of Human Rights gives, valid as that reason might be. He tells us, first of all, it goes against God's whole practice and attitude. Look at 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 a kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?

But you have dishonoured the poor man. See what James is saying? You can't dishonour these ones who God himself has honoured with the kingdom. To be an heir of the kingdom means these people who are despised by the world will one day inherit true wealth, inherit a place and a role in God's renewed world. That place where there will be no more suffering. They're the ones of whom it can be truly said they will live happily ever after. That's how God has treated them. How can you treat them badly? James says. Now at this point, why don't they have a problem? Doesn't that mean God is shown favouritism? If he's bestowing his kingdom on these people, isn't he showing favouritism? Well, that's a good question to ask. But we need to think firstly about the identity of the poor that James is talking about, but also the extent of this pattern.

So he's not merely talking about the materially poor, and he's not only the poor who are heirs of the kingdom. Let's see what we mean by that. First of all, who are these poors who have God's promised the kingdom? Well, it's not just the materially poor. Let me read two statements of Jesus. First of all, Luke chapter 6, verse 20. Jesus said, blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Now that's clarified a bit more by Matthew, in his account.

Matthew 5, verse 3. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. So it's not merely the economically poor, the financially poor, who are part of God's kingdom. So those who often are in that state, but also recognise their spiritual quality, recognise their need for God to help them out, to rescue them, for they have no spiritual resources. And that is the way God seems to love to work. That's why the Apostle Paul can write to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians chapter 1, verse 26. Consider your calling, brothers.

Not many of you were wise, according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame what is wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are. So no human being might boast in the presence of God. See, God delights to bestow his kingdom on those who know they have nothing to offer. So if we disregard those people, we're going against God's pattern. But is it favoritism?

[13 : 59] Well, no, because it's not just the poor. It's not just the economically poor. Well, there's those who have little of the world's riches who particularly can see their need for God. But James has already written back in chapter 1, verse 10 of the rich believer, who is to boast of his humiliation.

So it's not only the materially poor. God isn't showing favoritism here. But we have to face the fact, for most of us who are actually materially wealthy in the world's terms, it is often hard to admit our need for God's grace, our need for utter dependence on him. We so easily trust in the things we own, don't we? That's why Jesus said it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Here's the first reason James gives why it's particularly wrong for Christians to show partiality. It's because God doesn't show partiality. But there's a second reason as well. Look down to the end of verse 6. Aren't all the rich the ones who oppress you and the ones who drag you into court? See, there's a second reason. It's just against common sense. It's against God's character in ways. It's also against common sense. You're trying to cozy up to these wealthy people, but otherwise they'll make life hard for you. You're like, he's not saying be mean to them because they're mean to you. He's saying be sensible. Perhaps for us today, James would say don't just try and ingratiate yourself with the media who then often just beat up Christians. That would be a mad thing to do.

But he gives us another reason in verse 7. Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honourable name by which you were called? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honourable name which is over you, literally?

[15:46] I don't know what it's like when you go to school or when you went to school. When I went to school or when my kids go to school, we write their names on their coat, on their books, on everything we can that is theirs. Why do we write their names on it?

To show us their possession. James is reminding us here that if we are Christians then God has written Jesus' name over us.

We belong to him. So when these wealthy people blaspheme the name of Jesus they're blaspheming the ones to whom we belong. When they slander the name of Christ when they slander Christians they're actually slandering our identity slandering the one to whom we belong. That's another reason James says to not show favouritism to them. It's going against God's pattern it's going against common sense it's going against our very identity as those who belong to the Lord Jesus.

But most importantly verses 8-11 he tells us it's wrong to show partiality because it goes against the law of the king and his kingdom. It goes against the law of the king and his kingdom.

[16:53] Look at verse 8. Go over the page. If I can turn it over. If you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture you shall love your neighbour as yourself 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 that 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. You may not commit adultery or murder but if you show partiality says James you haven't kept the royal law to love your neighbour as yourself. What is this royal law? Well it doesn't mean the most important law rather it means the law of the king and his kingdom. James back in verse 1 James called Jesus the Christ.

Christ Christ anointed one. It's a title of Jesus as king. We're part of his kingdom. Then in verse 5 he talks about heirs of the kingdom. It's all kingdom language.

[18:03] The royal law is the law of the kingdom. It's not one specific law that's more important than the others. It's the whole body of the law that is enforced under the king's rule.

It's the Old Testament law fulfilled and reinterpreted by the Lord Jesus. That is the law of the king and his kingdom. That's why James quotes Deuteronomy 19 verse 18 when he says to love your neighbour as yourself.

It's not a new law. Yes, Jesus repeated it but it wasn't new. So what James is doing here is underlining how important it is we live the way our king Jesus would have us live.

See, partiality is more serious than we ever thought says James. It's not just going against British values of tolerance. It's not just going against the UN declaration on human rights.

more importantly it's an offence to our gracious King Jesus. And remember who he is James says he is the Lord of glory you're holding faith in.

[19:05] He is the Lord of glory who to redeem us left that glory came to the squalor of the stable was despised and rejected by man that he could lift he became what we are so we can become what he is.

He is the Lord of glory who looked on us in our shame and weakness. How dare we go against his ways and his pattern and show partiality and favouritism.

So do you see the problem? It's a deeper problem than we ever believed isn't it? It's a deeper problem than we ever believed when we show partiality when I judge the lady with a cigarette or the man riding the pavement I'm going against God's attitude I'm going against common sense I'm going against what God has made us to be as his people and he's going against the way of the kingdom and the way of the king himself So what's the cure?

How can we treat people fairly and not with partiality? Well the UN Declaration of Human Rights was in a sense attempt to do that when the UN agreed to it on the 10th of December 1948 and what's that coming up for 67 years ago it was in the hope of it to solve the problem of partiality and prejudice and injustice in the world coming off the back of World War II later on in that declaration it says this or in the introduction it says this I should say that all peoples and all nations and every individual and every organ of society should keeping this declaration constantly in mind shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms see what they're

saying?

Teaching and education should help people respect these freedoms and then we'll live in a world without prejudice without partiality without injustice but 67 years on that hasn't worked has it?

[21 : 00] Why not? Because the problem is not with education the problem is not what we know the problem is in our hearts isn't it? See we need a deeper cure than someone telling us we should be fair to people we need something that's going to change our hearts don't we?

And that is actually the cure that's implicit in what James speaks of in verse 12 It may not sound like a cure but believe me it is we'll see why in a second So speak and so act as though it is for us to be judged under the law of liberty That's actually a command a command to constantly be aware that in what we say and how we act we're going to be judged under the law of liberty Now how is that a cure?

Well it's a cure as we understand what the law of liberty is What does it mean? Let me tell you briefly and I'll try and explain why this is so The law to live under the law of liberty means to live knowing we need our hearts changed and to live knowing we're accountable to God It means to live knowing we need our hearts changed and to live knowing we're accountable to God how do I get that?

Well because James has talked about this law of liberty before It means a law that brings liberty He mentioned it back in verse 25 of chapter 1 The law of liberty is the law that produces liberty Now what is liberty?

What is freedom? What is freedom for a fish? If a fish wants to be free what does it have to do? It has to not get out the water doesn't it?

[22 : 40] Why? Because a fish is designed to live in water That's where a fish is truly free And if you've seen fish swimming in an aquarium you've seen salmon leaping out the river to get up the river to its breeding ground That's where you see a salmon being perfectly free Because it's doing what it's designed to do The law of liberty is the law that shows us what we're to be shows us how we're designed to live shows us what our purpose is And that is God's law It's not a law on the outside of us which cannot change us But it's a law that God writes in our hearts that not only shows us freedom but makes us free Let's turn back to chapter 1 for a second See how James talks about this law of liberty It's the law fulfilled and interpreted and applied by the Lord Jesus So chapter 1 verse 18 He speaks about it speaks of God as of his own will that he brought us forth by the word of truth He made us new people by the word of truth That word of truth then in verse 21

James describes as the implanted word which is able to save your souls It's God's law written on our hearts written inside of us not just on tablets of stone outside not just in the UN declaration but written in our hearts this implanted word the gospel message the word of truth tells us that we are actually more sinful and wicked than we could ever imagine It tells us that our partiality our prejudices lying deep in our hearts are more sinful and wicked than we could ever imagine and yet we are more loved than we ever dreamed because God has sent his son to be our rescuer to be our Lord and saviour and so now that implanted word is God's spirit writing that word on our hearts and we can only have that word written on our hearts if we know our need for our hearts to be changed if we know that actually we do not have the resources to love our neighbours ourselves if we know we cannot do that that is what brings us to faith in Christ

Jesus that James has talked about in verse 1 it's as we trust him as our Lord to experience the law of liberty the spirit writing his law on our hearts but that doesn't mean we're just passive does it at the end of chapter 1 James had told us to be not merely hearers of the word but doers also here he tells us to speak and act as those judged under the law of liberty and I say hang on what do you mean being judged under the law of liberty didn't Jesus die and take our judgement well yes and no Jesus died to pay for our sin so we might not be judged but yet Jesus as judge will judge us by our actions how do those two things work out well let me give a little plug Sunday school next Sunday morning 9.30 I'm dealing with this very topic so come along there if you want to find out more but for the moment we can say this we will be judged on our actions but for those of us who trust in Christ those of us who have

God's law written on our hearts will be saying that all our actions are by grace Christ has died for our sin we will not be condemned and all our actions in this life flow from his grace flow from the fact that the law of liberty is written on our hearts so when we are judged if we have lived as those who are under the law of liberty lived as those who know we cannot keep the law on our own but know we need God's grace and forgiveness and we will not face the guilty verdict on that day but we've

seen that what we've done the good we've done has been by grace because the law is written on our hearts as John Calvin said the law of liberty is really the same as the mercy of God is coming to God coming to

Christ saying we know we need forgiveness we know we need that mercy but also we know we're accountable to him don't we think of what Jesus taught us to pray forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us it's not that us forgiving other people merits God forgiving us it's the other way around isn't it God forgives us so we're free to forgive others so it is here in James chapter 2 God in Christ has shown mercy to us so we can show mercy to others that's what James comes on to say in verse 13 for judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy see if we're still proud if we're still holding on to our own ability to keep God's law if we think we don't need Christ's mercy we'll end up not being merciful to others or if we're not being merciful to others and we're showing favoritism it shows we don't really recognize our need and our mercy our need for God's mercy if we find our status our sense of self our identity in our own achievements or in the things the world values be it our wealth our education our nice behavior our career our family if we find our identity in those things then we'll end up disparaging looking down at anyone who doesn't share in those things don't we it's like

[28 : 19] James is exhorting us to live as those who have the law of liberty written on our hearts to live as those who are Christ's people because we've turned to him for mercy if we show no mercy to others consistently and disregard others then we will not receive mercy on judgment day however insofar as we do show mercy to others verse 13 is telling us then God's mercy triumphs over his judgment because Christ has taken the condemnation for us see this is the only cure for partiality and favoritism see our prejudice and favoritism arise from our pride inside us our natural desire to feel good about ourselves and therefore find someone else to look down on that's why I felt the pang of self-righteousness and God cycled up the pavement towards me that's why I felt the pang of self-righteousness as the lady was smoking her cigarette on the pavement next to me but that's ridiculous isn't it

I need to remember my identity is not in keeping trivial laws about where you ride your bike or trivial health advice about smoking my identity is in the Lord Jesus Christ and I need his forgiveness and his mercy so I don't look down and exclude others if we see ourselves as naturally helpless naturally bigoted naturally partial naturally not loving others naturally deserving God's judgment and we look out ourselves for a cure we'll turn to Jesus the Lord of glory and remember how he took pity on us in our helplessness he left the glory of heaven for the shame and dirt of life on earth he ate with tax collectors and sinners for those who were religious he looked down on he was an outsider with nowhere to lay his head he was crucified the lowest of low criminals with a crowd mocking him all so he could rescue bigots and law breakers like me and you so we need to go to him for mercy find our true identity in him so as we do that that all prejudice and pride is cut off some of us who profess faith in

Christ need to take this seriously don't we we cannot show partiality or holding faith in the Lord of glory so I wonder who is it we discriminate against maybe it's the prayer that you need to pray as I did walking down the pavement last week how are we being double minded and the spirit helps us see that don't we some of us here are believers in the Lord Jesus perhaps we feel like we're the marginal ones we're the ones who live down in that case what we need to see here is the Lord does love you this Lord who chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise the Lord who has chosen you as he puts it in verse 5 chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom rejoice that you are loved by the Lord some of us here maybe do not hold the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ perhaps you love the UN article on human rights the UN declaration perhaps you love a more inclusive society it would be great if we were all in peace with each other wouldn't it and yet look in your own heart do you really go through life without showing partiality do you really not exclude others in your own mind what hope do you have in the judgment if it's your own record you're relying on when you come to Jesus when you come to this Lord of glory this Lord who has shown mercy accept with meekness the word implanted in you that he might write his law on your heart so speak and so act as those who have been judged under the law of liberty for judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy yet if you come to Christ for mercy mercy triumphs over judgment let's pray