

# Undivided community

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning, Church.

Today's Bible reading is taken from the book of James, chapter 2, verse 1 to 13. I'm reading from the NIV 2011 version.

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into a meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, here's a good seat for you, but say to the poor man, you stand well.

Or sit on the floor by my feet? Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers and sisters.

[ 1 : 11 ] Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him. But you have dishonored the poor.

Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the normal name of him to whom you belong?

If you really keep the royal law found in scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, you shall not commit adultery also said, you shall not murder.

If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.

[ 2 : 19 ] Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment. This is the word of the Lord.

Again, if you are new this morning, we are actually just going through a series on the book of James at the moment.

So we are in James chapter 2 verse 1 to 13. And you will get the most benefit out of the sermon if you keep your Bibles open to the book of James. And again, there is a sermon outline to help you. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I just pray that your Holy Spirit will be working in our hearts this morning.

That you will let the word do its work. I pray that as I preach, you would help me to preach this to myself as well. And to not just to the congregation.

[ 3 : 26 ] And that together as one church, we would indeed seek to live the way that you want us to. That we might follow the ways of Jesus, our King.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen. As a country, we like to portray ourselves as a tolerant and multicultural society. We often pride ourselves on our ethnic and religious diversity.

So it's been interesting to me to read this week about the kind of experiences that real Malaysians have. Let me recount to you some of them. One Indian record his time in school during Pendidikan Jasmani lessons.

During PJ lessons, he said, The teachers will ask us to form a circle and hold hands. And I always hear a few girls say, Yeah. And then they move on to someone with lighter skin.

That hurt a lot. Until I was much, much older and I learned to ignore them. But I would go home and cry. The Bono Post columnist, Miriam Chaco, doesn't see things improving much, even as an adult.

[ 4 : 41 ] As a dark-skinned woman, these are some of the comments she has heard. But she's a bit dark. Or he is very dark, but nice.

How could such a dark-skinned person afford such a fancy car? And our prejudices and discriminatory practices cut across all walks of society.

There's a Malaysian human rights organisation called GOMAS. And every year, they release something called a Malaysian Racial Discrimination Report. I had a look through the 2017 version. Not surprisingly, they report many instances of discrimination against non-Muslims, which you are probably familiar with from the news. Such as that Muslim-only laundromat in Johor that caused such controversy last year.

Or a Muslim-only toilet that was apparently installed on the East Coast Expressway. I don't need to repeat the facts of those cases to you. But before non-Muslims get too smart, consider this story from the same report.

[ 5 : 50 ] Some journalists from the Star of different races caught the same 30 property listings. 50% of the agents or house owners rejected them when the caller was from a different race to them.

And this was just to get a viewing, not even to meet the owners. Consider the experience of a non-Chinese PR officer at her company.

Because most of her colleagues and superiors spoke Mandarin, they would often converse in Mandarin socially, and even during work meetings. And they did not acknowledge her existence even when she was standing in the same circle.

That meant being left out of work decisions and social gatherings. Regardless of ethnicity, we're all guilty. Now although we might be living in the so-called Malaysia Baru, it seems we have a very long way to go.

But what about the Christian community? What about God's people? This morning, at the beginning of the service, we sung about how we're a chosen people.

[ 7 : 03 ] A royal priesthood. A holy nation. That's certainly how the Bible describes us. We're God's new society. Caught to shine. Caught to be different.

Caught to be distinctive. We're supposed to be what the long-time missionary to India, Leslie Newbridgeon, caused the sign and foretaste of the kingdom.

In other words, when people encounter the church, when they come into Christian community, they're supposed to get a taste of what life would be like in God's kingdom.

We're supposed to be like the samples that sales promoters offer at the supermarket, which tastes so good that people want more. They want the full package.

And through our community life, we're supposed to be a vibrant witness to the transforming power of the gospel. That people want to know, what is this gospel? What's this good news about Jesus that we have?

[ 8 : 06 ] We're meant to be clear signposts. And so it's a sad and terrible thing when our community life fails to reflect the gospel.

It's a sad and terrible thing if our community life mirrors our divided society rather than the God we serve and the kingdom we are ambassadors of.

It's a sad and terrible thing if we put people off Jesus by doing stuff that is contradictory to the inner logic of the gospel.

Well, that's what Pastor James wants us to consider today. He wants us to consider our community life. Remember last week what his big point was?

Don't merely listen to the word. Do what it says. Listening leads to living. Doctrine leads to deeds. The two pedals go together.

[ 9 : 09 ] And that's true not just individually but as a community. If last week we learn what the marks of a real Christian are, well, this week we'll learn what one of the marks of a real Christian church is.

We'll discover what kingdom people are supposed to be like. And as we listen, remember what Pastor James often says. Don't deceive yourselves.

I think he said it twice last week. Don't shortchange yourself. As we listen, be honest in our self-evaluation. Are we, KEC, living as kingdom people?

If not, then be ready to change, myself included, and start living out the word. So what are kingdom people like?

As often with James, it's quite simple. Kingdom people don't show favoritism. Verse 1. My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

[ 10 : 20 ] Now notice how gentle James is. My brothers and sisters. James is not about to go on a rant about how the people he's writing to are such rubbish Christians and need a kick up the backside and a slap on the wrist.

And let me just begin by saying that that's not my intention either. We're going to hear some challenging stuff. But this sermon is not meant to be a scolding session. But Pastor James is firm. Believers, he says, must be consistent with their beliefs. That's why they are believers in the first place. And they must not show favoritism.

Why? Because the one we believe in, Jesus Christ, is nothing like that. Think about how James Buddy, the Apostle John, describes our encounter with Jesus.

We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. We, if we believe in Jesus, have seen this glorious Jesus Christ.

[ 11 : 33 ] But the only reason we've seen his glory was because he laid aside his glory. He became poor and chose to go to all kinds of people.

In John's Gospel, we find him talking to the great Jewish teacher, Nicodemus, but also the Sharned Samaritan woman whom no one wanted to associate with.

We find him going to the man born blind, whom everyone assumed was a great sinner, and to Peter at the end, whom everyone knew to be the great traitor.

He never showed any hint of favoritism. He never made judgments based on superficial criteria, like their skin color, or what village they come from, or their personality type.

So it must be with us. Believers in the glorious Jesus Christ must never show favoritism. Now to help us picture this, James paints a scenario for us.

[ 12 : 40 ] Verse 2. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in fealty old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes, and say, here's a good seat for you, but say to the poor man, you stand there, or sit on the floor by my feet, have you not discriminated among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

So picture the scene. It's Sunday morning, and we have two visitors before us. The first man is wearing a gold ring, or perhaps in today's terms, it's a gold Rolex.

And yes, you can see that the serial numbers are glowing, so it's genuine. And he's got on fine clothes, the kind that I'm just branded, but actually custom-made for him, full of elegance, and fitting to his body shape.

Sticking out of his pocket is the latest iPhone, and when your eyes sweep down to his feet, you notice dress shoes made from the finest European calf leather.

Now when he speaks, his voice is smooth and classy. You know, a little bit like Lao Tse when he read the Bible last week. Now, all in all, he looks absolutely classy.

[ 14 : 01 ] His entire get-up communicates to you that this guy isn't just rich. He's got status. He's exactly the kind of person our society admires.

And he's the kind of person who looks like he could make a real contribution as a Christian. As you see him walk in, you're already dreaming. Oh, just imagine if this visitor wasn't a Christian, but he professed faith at our church, no less.

That would instantly make our church more visible to the wider community. The people outside would whisper, Oh, you know, that so-and-so became a Christian at that church at Jalan Laksamana, Cheng Ho.

Oh, and he now goes there, you know. Just imagine the impact that could have for evangelism. We could put him on our posters for Christianity Explored, and our attendance would double.

He's the kind of person who would make generous contributions to our building and burial fund. Think of the potential. And he must be kind of smart and connected to get to where he is now.

[ 15 : 14 ] So maybe we could instantly put him on our church leadership team, and our church will get big-name speakers and have a breakthrough. But there's another visitor.

As soon as he walks in, you're struggling not to hold your nose. He looks like he may have just come in off the streets. His clothes are mismatched, with perhaps a few tiny holes showing through. He looks thoroughly unimpressive, like a beggar, the sort of person the world would judge to bring little, if any, value to society.

He certainly won't add value to our church. He's going to bring it down, in fact. When other visitors walk in and catch a sight of him, oh, maybe they won't come back.

Or even worse, perhaps our first visitor won't come back. So that's our two visitors. And there are two responses in this scenario.

[ 16 : 21 ] When it comes to our first visitor, not one, not two, but three elders immediately rush to speak to him, welcoming him warmly. They try to find him a good seat, where not only can he get a good view, but the congregation can get a good view of him.

Well, God has given us this opportunity, so we better steward it properly, we reason. Meanwhile, an usher gets tasked with talking to the second visitor, and to bring him somewhere where he can just be a little bit out of the way.

Well, of course he can sit in our service. We welcome everybody, just as long as people like him know their place. Now, we might laugh and say, this doesn't happen in church, and certainly not at our church.

But remember what Pastor James said? Be careful not to deceive ourselves. Think about it. The next time YB Baru Biyan comes to church, and in fact he's in church this morning, will there be scores of people all waiting to have a word with him during morning tea?

Meanwhile, are there scores of people who are waiting to speak to that elderly lady with a walker, sitting beside the kueh table, wondering if anyone will acknowledge her?

[ 17 : 52 ] Will there be scores of people looking out for that 18-year-old Swinburne University student who's just come from outstation, who's bravely come to our church for the first time despite not knowing anyone?

Or will they be standing all alone, nursing their cup of tea while looking at the people speaking to YB Baru or YB Dr. Jared? Or perhaps we're talking to another person at small group for the first time, we've met them for the first time.

And when she says she's a doctor, do you treat her more favourably than if she were to say she's a beautician? Why?

And if I had a degree from Oxford but preached heresy, would you listen to me more than if I had a degree from Unimas even though I preached faithfully?

Why? If God were to observe our church, what would he say? This is no hypothetical scenario.

[ 19 : 01 ] Judging from verses 5 to 7, it looked like it had actually happened before amongst the people to whom James was writing. You have dishonoured the poor, he says in verse 6.

And it wouldn't be the last time in the history of the church. During the time of George Whitefield, the great evangelist, and John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, the established church had become elitist and a place for the rich.

The poor didn't come because they felt out of place amongst the well-fed and the well-dressed. So both Wesley and Whitefield had to go out to do open-air preaching to reach the poor.

Because those in church thought it unthinkable that they should be singing side by side with people of a different rank, so to speak. But when we do this, James says, first of all, have we not discriminated among ourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

We've made judgments based on superficial criteria and purely external appearances. We've actually mentally sorted people into two boxes.

[ 20 : 18 ] Those who bring added value and those who don't. The first visitor with his gold ring and fine clothes, he's valuable. And the second visitor with his filthy old clothes, he's not.

And so what we've actually done is we've divided the church, even if we don't realize it. And actually, we've gone back to counterfeit Christianity, not real Christianity.

Remember the end of chapter 1 last week? Look at 1, verse 27. Religion that God, our Father, accepts as pure and faultless is this.

To look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. True religion is inclined towards the needy, the orphan, the widow, the poor.

And true religion means not following the ways of the world will often perform cost-benefit analysis on people to see if they bring added value or not.

[ 21 : 33 ] When we assign spiritual value, differing spiritual value, based on a person's racial, economic, educational, or some other external background, we are not following the ways of the kingdom.

That's not the logic of the gospel, which renders every person valuable in the sight of God. The cross brings us on a level playing field.

And what James does now for the rest of today's passage is to introduce two big reasons why kingdom people don't show favoritism. As always, with the New Testament, we are not just given instructions, but we are also given the framework, the theological principles behind the instruction.

We are going to see how the gospel itself shapes those instructions. So in verses 5 to 7, we get the first reason. Kingdom people don't show favoritism, for kingdom people know who God calls. Kingdom people know who God calls. Verse 5. Listen, my dear brothers and sisters, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

[ 22 : 54 ] James here is reflecting on how God typically works. You see, God calls people to himself. And over and over again, in the Bible, he calls surprising people.

God called Abraham, an old man. God called Moses, a stutterer. God called Rahab, a prostitute. God called Jonah, a runaway prophet.

God called Matthew, a hated tax collector. God called Saul, a persecutor of Christians. Christians. These are people who make up God's church.

And so, it's no surprise that God calls the poor in the eyes of the world, those who look like they have little to contribute. During James' time, a big majority of Christians were from poorer backgrounds.

These were mainly the people who were responding to the gospel. Why? Probably because these were the people who know what it means to be desperate. They understand what it means to be dependent.

[ 24 : 04 ] And those are the people whom God looks for. Just look at what Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 26. Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were caught.

Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many were influential. Not many were of noble birth. See, God calls the dependent.

And the same seems to hold true today. If we were to look at the statistical profile of the worldwide church, we notice again that often, the people who respond best to the gospel are the poor.

And as Paul goes on to note in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 27, But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

By contrast, God cannot work with the arrogant. Look at what many of the rich people during the time of James were doing, verses 6 and 7.

[ 25 : 06 ] Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

These people, already rich, were likely using their influence to secure favourable verdicts against the poor. And they were probably thinking that they could get away with it.

Even God doesn't stop us, they were bragging. We are practically like gods ourselves. And these are the sort of people you are trying to win favour with, James asks.

They have no interest in the kingdom. Well, they certainly don't show kingdom values. Why do you dishonour the poor for the sake of such people?

Now, could we be the same? Could we sometimes give more priority to the politically connected, the rich tauke, the person in power, in the hope that they can do the church a favour, even if they actually have priorities and values that are against God's kingdom?

[ 26 : 20 ] Now, at this point, we might be wondering, but isn't this some sort of reverse discrimination? Is God perhaps some sort of Marxist, always siding with the poor, and always against the rich?

But look closely again at verses 5-7. Now, notice that God is not simply targeting these rich people just because they're rich.

No, he's denouncing them because of their actions, exploitation, and blasphemy. And similarly, notice that he chooses the poor, not simply because they are poor materially, as if that made them better spiritually.

rather, he is simply saying that while the world has given them the lowest position, he has given them the highest if they trusted him, to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom.

When you know God's love in Christ, this is what you get, even if the outside world thinks otherwise. So it's not that rich people cannot be in God's kingdom.

[ 27 : 28 ] God's kingdom will be made up of all kinds of people. Rather, it's simply that God calls the dependent, not the arrogant.

He chooses the broken, not the self-sufficient. There was an evangelist who moved from the UK to Vancouver, which I think is consistently ranked as one of the top five most livable cities in the world.

people. But he says that it's tough ground for the gospel there. Why? Because, he said, they think they are in heaven already. They don't feel dependent.

And so God chooses the nobodies as a way of showcasing what his kingdom is all about. His kingdom is populated by people who know that they cannot bring anything before God, who have nothing to boast in, who realize that their entire life is a gift from God, from physical birth to new birth to new creation.

The kingdom is populated by people who just run to Jesus, who say they believe in him, who throw themselves at their feet, say Christ is enough.

[ 28 : 47 ] So when we show favoritism, especially to those who are considered somebodies rather than nobodies, we are acting contrary to the workings of the kingdom. We are living out the world's value system instead.

So kingdom people don't show favoritism. Well, that's the first reason. Here's the second. Kingdom people don't show favoritism, for kingdom people live by kingdom standards.

Kingdom people live by kingdom standards. Verse 8. If you really keep the royal law found in scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right.

James is quoting Leviticus 19, which Jesus also quotes when he's summing up the entire Old Testament law. Love God, love your neighbor.

And James is saying, in God's kingdom, this is how it is. Yes, we are now under the new covenant. And so the Old Testament law has to be understood through the lens of what Jesus has done.

[ 29 : 57 ] That's why you never hear James talk about something like circumcision, for instance, even though he's talking primarily to Jewish Christians. Because he understands that the right of circumcision has been fulfilled when we receive a circumcision of the heart by the spirit, when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to us.

Jesus. But under the new covenant, we are under the rule now of Jesus the king. And so we listen to his word, and we live out his word.

We're back to the two pedals of last week. And the king says, love your neighbor. Now it could be that some people were protesting to James.

But we are loving our neighbor. And that's why James says in verse 8, oh good, if that's what you're doing, you're doing right. But, he asks, who are you actually loving?

You told me that you sent three elders to greet your first visitor. Wow, great, you're loving him. But what about the second visitor? Is he your neighbor too?

[ 31 : 08 ] After all, Jesus said that your neighbor isn't just your fellow Israelite. but the foreigner, and even the enemy. Your neighbor isn't just people like you, the same race as you, or the same background and life experiences as you.

That's your identical twin, not your neighbor. And, verse 9, if you show favoritism, if you're only loving the first visitor and not the second, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. You failed to fully follow Jesus. And so, yes, it could very well be true that you're loving people, but is it just your identical twin and not your neighbor?

And this is important to reflect upon as a church. We've had quite a number of visitors and newcomers over the past month or so, people who transferred to Kuching for work, people starting new semesters at uni.

And in a smaller congregation like our Mandarin one, in some ways, if such people come in, we have no choice but to talk to them, even when they're different in age and background to you.

[ 32 : 25 ] I'm not saying that our Mandarin congregation does it grudgingly, just in case I'm misunderstood. They'll do that willingly, of course. But in a bigger congregation like ours, it can be easier to gravitate to those just like us, simply because of our size.

And we welcome visitors who do look like us, we invite them out for makan, we show them love. And so it seems like we're doing a good job.

When asked whether we're a welcoming church, we say, of course we are, look at how friendly I am to X or Y. But it could be that we've accidentally excluded others. We don't even realise we're doing it because we haven't even noticed them.

Because they're not like us. It's not that we are rude or unfriendly, it's just that we're so caught up in our own bubble that we can't see ourselves objectively.

And not just with newcomers, but with long-timers, perhaps even more so. I mentioned at the beginning about the experience of that non-Mandarin speaking PR lady at her company.

[ 33 : 36 ] Well, do we sometimes, when we gather in a circle, speak in a dialect that one of us cannot understand, and so actually end up excluding that non-dialect speaking person?

Perhaps we don't even realise we're doing it. But Jesus says, love your neighbour. Jesus didn't say, don't hate your neighbour.

He goes stronger. He says, love them. And it's good to know in our church that it does happen. One of our home fellowship groups I know have been looking after one of our Unimus students very well. Others quietly behind the scenes look out for the unwell, the marginalised. Thank you so much. But we can always be more intentional. After all, verse 10, for whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles, at just one point is guilty of breaking of all of it.

You see, the law is not just a list of individual do's and don'ts. Rather, the law is undivided. Because ultimately, these are the words of a single lawmaker.

[ 34 : 47 ] These are the words of Jesus our King. That's the point of verses 10 and 11. Now, James is not saying that we're going to fulfil every demand of the law.

That's not what his point is. He's simply saying that when we fall short of loving our neighbour, we fall short of God's will for us. So again, do honest self-evaluation.

Don't deceive ourselves. We can do better. I can do better. Take a risk. Don't be afraid to be intentional, to look around, look at someone you don't know, ask, are you a newcomer?

We'd love to get to know you. Even if the reply is, actually, young man, I've been here for 20 years. And if you're the person who's been here for 20 years, well, don't get offended.

Think about how this is an opportunity to love your neighbour that you don't actually know. For in the end, verse 12, speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

[ 36 : 05 ] Kingdom people live by kingdom standards. We've been shown mercy. We've been set free. And so the way we deal with others will not be characterised by favouritism, by partiality, but by mercy.

And a consistent lack of desire to show mercy to others could mean that perhaps we have not properly understood the gospel in the first place.

For mercy is not getting what we deserve. And that's exactly what happened when Jesus took our place on the cross. We deserve punishment, but on the cross, mercy triumphs over judgment.

And so that means in our lives, whenever mercy triumphs over the judgments we make whenever we show favouritism, we are showing we are kingdom people.

We are people who are trusting in the King. So brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism.

[ 37 : 18 ] For as we look forward to that final day, when we gather around the throne of that same Lord, we will be made up of people from every tribe, every tongue, every nation, rich and poor alike.

We will be undivided in our praise of Jesus, who became poor so that we might become rich. So let's respond today to the call to love our neighbour in obedience to our King.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Heavenly Father, we have heard your word, we have heard the word of the King, and we understand that in different ways, it could be very challenging to us.

We pray that we will not be like the man in the mirror, who, after looking in the mirror, goes away and forgets what he looks like, and does not act on the knowledge that he's gained.

But Father, we just pray that we will act consistently with our beliefs, that our community life will reflect the beautiful gospel that we have, that the Lord Jesus went across all ethnic barriers to Jew and Gentile alike, so that people might know him and the grace that he has.

[ 38 : 53 ] We pray that we will be the same, acting as signposts in the way we treat others and in not showing favoritism. All this we pray in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.