

2

OPEN ARMS



*When have you felt like
“the new kid”?*

QUESTION #1

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE **21**

THE POINT

Welcoming others goes beyond a friendly handshake.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Moving is hard. In addition to packing your belongings and boxing up your memories, you also have to acclimate to new surroundings. A new grocery store. A new traffic pattern. Even a new local news team on TV. Everything is new and nothing is familiar.

That won't last forever. What is new will eventually become familiar. Things will become comfortable as you adjust to your new normal. We all love familiarity because what is familiar is comfortable.

That kind of familiarity and comfort can be good when we are adjusting to a new home, but it's dangerous in the life of a Christian.

We naturally gravitate to the people we know best and who are like us. It's easier to interact with people with whom we share a common interest or background. But a problem arises when those friendships drive us to overlook or ignore others, or worse, to show preferential treatment. Jesus, on the other hand, loves all people the same—and we're called to do likewise. We must learn to embrace everyone with open arms.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

James 2:1-4

¹ My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ² For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³ and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” ⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

The Book of James was written to Christians who were undergoing persecution. James wrote this letter not only to encourage them to remain strong during those difficult times, but also to remind them that faith and obedience is linked together.

It’s in this context that James addressed the issue of partiality. These Christians claimed to believe the gospel and follow Jesus, but apparently they were not treating people equally in their congregations, especially regarding wealth. According to James, this was an evil thing to do. This is true for at least three reasons:

- 1. Partiality neglects the image of God in fellow humans.** When we show favoritism to one person or group of people over another, we are—whether we realize it or not—subtly neglecting the truth that all human beings have been created in the image of God. Because all of us have been created in God’s image, every one of us is worthy of honor and dignity. When we remove some of that honor and dignity, even if it seems like a small thing, we are doing more than exercising our preference for one group or another. We are denying the image of God in the neglected party.

What are some ways we might be tempted to show favoritism today?

QUESTION #2

2. Partiality sees others as objects to be used. Why might we show favoritism? In James' illustration of the rich man and the poor man in the fellowship, the reason is simple: we can get something from the rich man. By showing favoritism, we might receive: some of his money, a greater reputation because we are associated with a person of prominence, or his approval which would increase our self-esteem. Whatever the case, we are hoping to gain something from him, which means we are using that person rather than serving and loving him.

3. Partiality sets us up as judge. Favoritism is a big deal because it puts us in the place of God. We are determining someone's worthiness based on some preconceived notion because of the person's clothes, money, reputation, or whatever. But we are not equipped to make this judgment. Indeed, only God can look at the heart. When we show partiality, we are putting ourselves in the place of God. We are judging the worth of another.

James 2:5-7

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?

⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court?

⁷ Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

How do these verses reveal God's character?

QUESTION #3

We might be tempted to think partiality is not that big a deal, but we only think that when we fail to see the heart behind such actions. James has already helped us see that "evil" is not too strong a word to use when describing favoritism.



In addition to the evil of treating other people as objects rather than as fellow image-bearers, partiality is also wrong because it runs contrary to the heart of God. When you begin to consider God's posture toward humanity, an important word comes to mind: *grace*. Because of His great love for us, God has assumed a posture of grace toward human beings.

When we adopt an attitude of favoritism, we are neglecting God's heart of grace in at least two ways:

1. Favoritism makes assumptions based on external appearance. God's grace is not based on how much money we have, how educated we are, or how polished our appearance. When we show favoritism based on these external qualities, we are implying that someone is either closer to or further away from God's favor. Such an attitude runs contrary to the very definition of grace.

2. Favoritism focuses on what we receive rather than what we can give. Perhaps in James' day, the thinking was that by showing favoritism to these seemingly important people, the congregation might receive financial benefit. In either case, the focus is on what the church might receive. This, too, runs contrary to what grace is: a gift freely given with nothing expected in return.

If we want to adopt the heart of God, then no place remains for partiality and favoritism. We must recognize that it is only by grace that we have been welcomed into His family—and we are to extend that same grace to others.

James 2:8-10

⁸ If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.

Perhaps the most obvious reason why partiality and favoritism are wrong is because attitudes like these are inconsistent with love. And love is the language the Christian should speak above anything else.

Love God. Love people. That's it. If we do this, then we are doing everything. James called love "the royal law according to the Scripture." But as James also pointed out, the opposite is also true—if we fail at love, then we fail at everything else. To show favoritism is to be guilty of all.

Many times we don't understand how strong our vertical relationship with God is related to our horizontal relationships with others. We know we're supposed to love each other, but a lot of the time doing so seems to be a sheer act of will. Such an attitude entirely misses the connection between our relationship with God and our relationships with others.

We love others not because we force ourselves to do so, but because we are truly in touch with the measure of God's love for us. Since that's true, the opposite is also true: we fail to love others because we fail to believe or understand the fullness or completeness with which we have been loved by God.

When the temptation to show favoritism rises inside us—when we know our tendency is to always favor one group over another—we would do well to remind ourselves that we are all on level ground at the foot of the cross. "None is righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10). Not even that person or group we tend to favor, and certainly not us. God Himself does not show favoritism; instead, He is building His kingdom from unlikely places and sources. And that should be our attitude.

What is the connection between our relationship with God and our relationship with others?

QUESTION #4

How can the truths of these verses help our group be more welcoming?

QUESTION #5

LOVE ANYWAY

Select the image that best represents a situation where you find it difficult to demonstrate love.



What is a practical step you can take to make sure you are prepared to respond appropriately in the situation you chose?

Convince yourself to love anyway!

"You shall love the Lord your God with all
your heart and with all your soul and
with all your strength and with all your
mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

— LUKE 10:27

LIVE IT OUT

We must break out of the huddles of familiarity we have created for ourselves and reach out to any and all God brings our way. Choose one or more of the following applications.

- ▶ **Pray.** Pray specifically that God would bring you in contact with someone who looks, talks, or thinks differently than you.
- ▶ **Change seats.** When you gather this week to worship or in your group, intentionally sit somewhere different. Sit next to someone new and engage him or her in conversation.
- ▶ **Go someplace new.** Don't just wait for someone different to come your way; be proactive and go out of your way to meet someone new. Go to a different area in your community for some everyday task like buying groceries. While you're there, engage someone new in conversation.



It's always easier to surround ourselves with people who are familiar, but we must remember that God loves everyone the same, so we must learn to embrace them all with open arms.

My thoughts