



SESSION 2

OPEN ARMS

▶ **The Point**

Welcoming others goes beyond a friendly handshake.

▶ **The Passage**

James 2:1-10

▶ **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.

▶ **The Setting**

The Letter of James was written by James, the brother of the Lord Jesus, probably some time between AD 50 and AD 60. Very little is known about the audience to which James wrote, but his teachings are clear. In chapter 2 of his letter, James addressed the issue of showing favoritism to the rich over the poor when they visited this group of believers.

What does the Bible say?

Partiality (v. 1)—The displaying of preferential treatment to a person (or persons) not shown to others.

Royal law (v. 8)—This law is royal because it contains the standard for living in God's kingdom. (See Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:39.)

James 2:1-10

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?

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?

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.

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes



Notes

DISCUSS: Question #1 on page 21 of the Personal Study Guide (PSG): “**When have you felt like ‘the new kid?’**”
Allow time for each person to respond.

GUIDE: Direct group members to “**The Bible Meets Life**” on page 22 of the PSG. Emphasize the way comfort and personal preferences hinder our connection with others by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read it on their own.

GUIDE: Call attention to “**The Point**” on page 22 of the PSG: “**Welcoming others goes beyond a friendly handshake.**”

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): During the study of James 2:1-4, only call on, acknowledge, and talk to people who have a similar trait that you select, such as having brown eyes or black hair, wearing tennis shoes or jeans, or those wearing (or not wearing) a watch. Make it very obvious that you are showing partiality toward certain people, even to the point of totally ignoring others. To make this really effective, use a trait that those who would normally talk, ask questions, and/or respond doesn’t have. Inform your group that the way you interact with them is going to be a bit “different” today. When you get to James 2:5-7, identify the preferences you displayed and discuss how showing partiality can make people feel unwelcome.

PRAY: Transition into the study by asking the Lord to reveal to us preferences and areas of comfort we allow to get in the way of our witness. Thank God for the way He has welcomed us without partiality.

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STUDY THE BIBLE

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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?

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud James 2:1-4 on page 23 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 23 of the PSG: **"What are some ways we might be tempted to show favoritism today?"**

GUIDE: Use the Commentary on the next page of this Leader Guide to help group members understand the context of the partiality that was taking place in the early church.

SUMMARIZE: Highlight the main points from pages 23-24 of the PSG.

- 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.
- 2. Partiality sees others as objects to be used.** When we show partiality, 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.** When we show partiality, we are putting ourselves in the place of God. We are judging the worth of another.

TRANSITION: In the next verses, we see that we are to avoid partiality because it is inconsistent with God's heart and should be inconsistent with ours.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:
What motivates people to show partiality and favoritism?

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James 2:1-4 Commentary

[Verse 1] Partiality is an act of evil. As believers in Jesus Christ, we are to avoid partiality and treat all people with the same love and interest. James addressed this issue with his readers. He identified himself with his audience by calling them **my brothers**. James admonished them not to show **partiality**. In both the Old and New Testaments, God commands His people not to show favoritism. (See Lev. 19:15; Col. 3:11.) Showing partiality is particularly incompatible with those who have been redeemed by grace through faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, God incarnate. (See John 1:12-14; 1 Cor. 2:8.) “A favouritism based on external considerations is inconsistent with faith in the One who came to break down the barriers of nationality, race, class, gender and religion.”¹

It is easy, even for believers, to fall into the trap of showing partiality to some at the expense of others. Outward appearances often serve to trigger such partiality. What can be signaled and seen outwardly? Political party affiliation may show in a campaign button or a bumper sticker. Nationality may show in distinctive clothing or accent. Ethnicity and race may show in skin color. Poverty and wealth can show quickly in clothing, accessories, hairstyles, or even conversation.

[Verse 2] In regard to this church, James specifically highlighted the problem of showing favoritism based on wealth and poverty. He gave an example of two men coming into **your assembly** and being received quite differently. The assembly could have been for worship or discussion of the gospel with inquirers or for another purpose. The important point is that believers were in charge and responsible for accommodating those attending.

A man entered. His **gold ring** and **fine clothing**—literally, “shining,” made it obvious the man was wealthy. Then, in came another man. He wore **shabby clothing**. He had no ring. He might have been destitute, or he may have come in from a hard, sweaty day’s work in the fields. He had little, if any, money, and his appearance announced that fact.

[Verse 3] Unfortunately, the church’s favor fell squarely on the rich man and not on the poor man. Believers encouraged the rich man to sit in a **good place**. The good place, surely convenient and comfortable, would have been a place of status and honor. In contrast, they told the poor man to **stand** out of the way, inconspicuously, in a place that fit his seeming insignificance. If he really had to **sit**, he was to sit on the floor by the speaker’s feet.

The floor is not a bad place, of course, if the whole congregation sits on it. When I lived in India, I often worshiped sitting on the floor with other believers. If, on the other hand, the rich sit in chairs while the poor are on the floor, that’s a problem.

[Verse 4] James rhetorically inquired: haven’t you **made distinctions among yourselves**? The expected answer was yes. The believers had wrongly created divisions among the people in this gathering. In so doing, they had **become judges with evil thoughts**. Their evil thoughts and wrong motives drove their judgments. They were judging according to the ways of the world, which are opposed to God, rather than thinking and acting according to who they were in Christ.



STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

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?

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud James 2:5-7 on page 24 of the PSG.

GUIDE: Use the Commentary on the next page of this Leader Guide to help group members understand how partiality neglects God’s heart.

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 24 of the PSG: **“How do these verses reveal God’s character?”**

SUMMARIZE: Highlight the main points from pages 25 of the PSG. 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.** 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.** This, too, runs contrary to what grace is: a gift freely given with nothing expected in return.

RECAP: 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.

TRANSITION: The next verses show us how expressing love for all people is consistent with God’s heart.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

What does it look like on a practical level to be rich in faith?

James 2:5-7 Commentary

[Verse 5] With his words, James was attempting to communicate to his readers that partiality neglects God's heart. Identifying himself with his readers as believers in Christ, James asked another rhetorical question, to which the expected answer was yes. God has a special concern for the **poor** (see Ex. 22:21-24; Ps. 68:5; Isa. 1:17; Jas. 1:27), and He expects His people to share that same concern. God demonstrated His love for the poor by including them in the new birth that comes by repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. (See Jas. 1:9,12.) This does not mean all poor people are or will be saved, but God has drawn multitudes from among the world's poor to receive salvation.

God's standards are not the world's standards. (See 1 Cor. 1:26-29.) God chooses the poor **to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom**. (See Ps. 113:7-8.) The poorest believer is exorbitantly rich as a joint heir with Jesus. (See Rom. 8:17; Eph. 1:5-8.) That is God's choice!

[Verses 6-7] Yet believers in James's hypothetical example **dishonored** the poor man. God chooses to exalt the poor; yet we often choose to lower them to our feet! People who look poor may soon be born again into a great inheritance or may already be rich in Christ. We may be looking at a poor, weak, low-status person (from the world's perspective) when we really should be seeing a joint heir with Christ Jesus. Beware, lest you insult someone whose riches far exceed a gold ring and shining clothes!

This can happen at every level of society. The rich can show partiality. Middle-class people can show partiality. The poor can as well. It can happen in a large, wealthy congregation, an inner-city mission, or a prison Bible study. Outward status markers exist in most cultures. Whenever believers show favoritism, they contradict God's choice.

God's choice is one reason not to show favoritism. Another is that the rich **oppress** God's people and **blaspheme** Jesus' name. James did not mean that all rich people were oppressors, but wealthy people of power and influence often did take advantage of the poor in the socially-polarized first century. Of course, this was nothing new and echoes of the Old Testament prophets are in James's words. (See Ezek. 22:29; Amos 4:1.)

James also charged that the rich blaspheme the noble name of Jesus Christ. Again, not all rich people were blasphemers. Joseph of Arimathea was rich and a disciple of Jesus (see Matt. 27:57), but many rich and powerful people in the first century did despise and insult Jesus. To them, Jesus' crucifixion wasn't a loving sacrifice for others—it signified His rejection, shame, and revolting weakness. Wealthy people today often consider themselves successful in life and therefore see no need for a Savior.

To James's readers, the name of Jesus was noble and precious. It was the name pronounced over them and by which they were known. (Compare Isa. 63:19; 65:1; Amos 9:12.) As people who belonged to Christ, they had received and were living under His name.



STUDY THE BIBLE

NOTES

Dotted lines for taking notes.

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.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud James 2:8-10 on page 25 of the PSG.

RECAP: 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.

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 26 of the PSG: **“What is the connection between our relationship with God and our relationship with others?”**

RECAP: 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.

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 26 of the PSG: **“How can the truths of these verses help our group be more welcoming?”**

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

Why is love so important to the life of a church?

DO: Direct group members to complete the activity, “Love Anyway,” on page 27 of the PSG to help them relate to the difficulty we have expressing love sometimes.



Select the image that best represents a situation where you find it difficult to demonstrate love. [The PSG has four images from which to choose.]

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!

GUIDE: Refer back to **“The Point”** for this session: **“Welcoming others goes beyond a friendly handshake.”**

James 2:8-10 Commentary

[Verse 8] Showing love for all people is consistent with God's heart. James did grant the possibility that the believers could have honored both the rich man and the poor man. In such a case, this congregation would have been **doing well** in obedience to God's standards and His commands. However, if they failed to do this, they would have been violating the **royal law**. The *royal law* is the law of God that Jesus fulfilled. (See Matt. 5:17.) It is the law that Jesus exemplified and extended to His kingdom citizens that they should live it out as well. The royal law is God's full will and intent for His people in Christ Jesus.

This law is **according to the Scripture**. Jesus taught that the command to "**love your neighbor as yourself**" carries forward from the Old into the New Covenant as the most basic principle for relating to others. (See Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:34-40.) Paul echoed Jesus' teaching. (See Gal. 5:14; see also Rom. 13:8-10.)

[Verse 9] The actions of this church were an example of **partiality** and a very definite **sin** against the royal law. *Sin* is a violation against God's commands in thought and/or action, whether an act of commission or omission, and can be associated either with a single individual or, as in this case, with a group.

Having judged with evil thoughts in choosing the rich man over the poor man (see Jas. 2:4), those who showed favoritism were **convicted by the law as transgressors**. The judges were judged as transgressors!

[Verse 10] At this point, the question of significance may arise: if we transgress by showing partiality, are we guilty of a small or a big sin? James declared that if a believer fails in just **one point** to keep the royal law, he or she is guilty of breaking it all. The royal law is a whole. We do not pick and choose what commands to obey. To fail at one point is to challenge and reject our Lord's all-encompassing authority.

From this verse, a person might conclude that the royal law is a list of dos and don'ts that the believer has to live by, but such a conclusion would be incorrect. Later in this chapter, James calls this royal law "the law of liberty" (v. 12). The believer has freedom in Christ, but that freedom is not a license to do whatever he or she chooses. Paul addressed the issue of the freedom of the believer in Christ in his letter to the Galatian Christians: "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal. 5:13-14). Paul echoed the words of the Lord Jesus Himself. (See Matt. 22:37-40.)



5 minutes

LIVE IT OUT

GUIDE: Direct group members to page 28 of the PSG. Encourage them to choose one or more of the following applications:



Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

- ▶ **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.

Wrap It Up

TRANSITION: Read or restate the final paragraph from page 28 of the PSG:

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.

PRAY: Conclude by thanking the Lord for loving us even when we are unlovable. Ask Him to help us see the best in others and to love them well—even when we have difficulty in doing that.



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