

SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE

COFFEEHOUSE FIVE CHURCH

JAMES

PREJUDICE AND FAVORITISM

JAMES 2:1-13

05/14/2017



MAIN POINT

The way we behave toward people reflects what we really believe about God.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Would you say that you are good at first impressions? Have you ever made a snap judgment against someone based on a first impression?

When that happens, would you say the error in judgment comes from you, or from something the other person did? How do you let your estimation of a person affect the way you treat them?

In our current cultural moment, snap judgments are more prevalent than they have ever been—at least, social media and the 24-hour news cycles make it seem that way. Many of the messages we hear are partisan, and they are designed to divide rather than unite. Because of this, we consciously and subconsciously favor certain groups of people over others based on superficial differences. We can all agree that this is unhealthy, yet sinful patterns of prejudice and favoritism are so deeply ingrained in the way that we live, we hardly notice it. God's Word calls us to shine a light into our own hearts, for the way we behave toward people reflects what we really believe about God.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 2:1-4.

The word translated “favoritism” is only used a handful of times in the New Testament, and it means to be a “respector of persons.” How did this issue of regarding people because of external factors present itself in the early church?

What is the situation James describes in these verses? Is this a situation from the distant past or something that is very much a part of Christian culture today? Explain.

What is the root issue of favoritism and prejudice? Though James is describing the worship of the church, how does this extend beyond the context of a worship service? Where else have you observed prejudice and favoritism?

In the early church, an apparent tendency to favor the rich over the poor caused the rich to get prioritized treatment in Christian worship. Though this is the situation that James is addressing this kind of favoritism happens in every area of life. From our work, to the playground with our families, to church on Sunday, we walk around with hidden prejudice and bias. Favoritism is an especially heinous sin because it suggests that God has made some to be more special than others. It is a failure to regard people the way that God sees them. God is not interested in the exterior, but the interior (1 Sam. 16:7, Jer. 17:10).

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 2:5-6A.

James said prejudice is wrong because it is inconsistent with God's character. Read the following verses and take notice of God's character: Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11; Colossians 3:25; Deuteronomy 1:17, and 16:19. Who do the Scriptures reveal God to be?

Read Romans 5:8. What darkness and sin has Christ excused in your life? If God was willing to overlook our sin, why are we so unwilling to overlook less significant differences like race, age, income, ethnicity, or any other number of issues?

God does not play favorites because God is loving, and love and prejudice do not coincide. He sees all on the basis of their relationship with Him. Favoritism is theologically inconsistent with Christian faith. After all, God is concerned with the poor (Exod. 23:11; Luke 6:20; Ps. 12:5). God looks to the heart of a man, which is the reason we play favorites and God doesn't. We are able to hide much of our sin from others so they don't know what goes on in those quiet moments when no one is watching. We can't see the heart so we apply our judgment to what we can see. However, if the goal of the Christian life is to be like Christ, we should desire to be like God which means we need to regard others the same way that God does.

Why should Christians, above all others, be willing to look beyond the surface to see the heart? How should what Christ did for us motivate us to live? How is it motivating and challenging you?

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 2:6B-7.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-14. What are some ways that all people—regardless of social status or material wealth—can contribute to the kingdom of God?

In addition to being a heinous sin that ignores God's loving character, prejudice also does not make sense logically. Why? Because high status does not ensure godly character. In fact, many times it is a barrier to godly character. In the first century church, the rich in the church oppressed the poor—a situation James addressed. The Bible recognizes that all people have gifts that money cannot buy or create that make them useful in the kingdom of God.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 2:8-13.

What sins did James equate with favoritism? Why do we not think about treating others as "less than" as a serious sin? How often do you excuse this sin in others and in yourself?

Read John 13:34-35. What makes this a "new" commandment? What is the defining mark of a Christian disciple?

Even though Christians go into the day of judgment with assurance, they will still be held accountable for what they did (2 Cor. 5:10). What is the connection between loving God and being accountable to Him for your actions?

Favoritism is a sin just as grave and serious as murder or adultery. Just because it's easier to hide doesn't make it right. All sin must be addressed and repented of without quantification or excuse. It is both unbiblical and unloving to show preference to others based on superficial differences. Jesus provided the perfect example of love and sacrifice. His disciples were uneducated common men (Acts 4:13), tax collectors (Matt. 9:9), political zealots, and sinners. The commandment was new because we are to love as Jesus loved us. He is perfectly loving and merciful to us. However, one day we will stand before Him and be forced to answer to every deed we have done. Though we will be accounted righteous, we should remember this day with reverence and allow it to motivate us to live without partiality today.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

If you were gut-level honest, what areas of your life do you need to repent of for the sin of favoritism?

Are there any areas where favoritism has taken root in this group? How can we ensure that this group is a place where all people can feel comfortable and accepted?

How does showing prejudice and favoritism endanger our witness before a non-believing culture?

PRAY

Ask God to show you any hidden prejudice in your life so that you can repent. Ask the Spirit to help you see people as God does and love others as Jesus did.

COMMENTARY

JAMES 2:1-13

2:1. This verse commends Jesus as our glorious Lord Jesus Christ and warns that partiality against the poor is inconsistent with faith in Jesus Christ. My brothers shows that James wrote to his readers as believers and urged them to show the reality of their profession. Who is this Jesus? First, Jesus is the object of our faith. We have made a trust or commitment to him. We are believers in Jesus. Second, Jesus is the Lord of Glory. The Greek literally reads, "our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Glory." James gave the title of "Glory" to Jesus, using a term that represents the full presentation of God's presence and majesty. Jesus is the glorious God. This is a remarkable confession to come from Jesus' half brother.

The practice of favoritism involved giving benefits to people who had outward advantages such as money, power, or social prominence. The readers of James were courting the favor of these important people by showing preference for them over the poor. The Mosaic Law had forbidden giving respect to persons of prominence (Deut. 1:17). To these scheming readers James gave a sharp directive, "Stop it!"

2:2-4. These verses illustrate the discrimination. In a Christian assembly a rich man and a poor man appeared. Perhaps both were non-Christians. The meeting could have taken place in the home of a Christian. The rich man wore a gold ring and fine clothes. The poor man appeared in shabby clothes. The word describing the ring of the rich man indicated that he was "gold-fingered." He may have worn gold rings on several fingers. Wealthy people often wore more than a single ring. Shops rented rings to those wanting to give the appearance of wealth. Fine, used to describe the rich man's clothing, means "sparkling" or "glittering." Acts 10:30 uses the same word to describe the "shining" garments an angel was wearing. We would say he was a "smart" dresser.

Shabby, used to describe the poor man's clothing, pictured clothing which was dirty or filthy. The man may have come from work, his clothing stained with the evidence of his labor. The handsome apparel of the rich man earned special treatment for him (v. 3). The greeter gave him a place of special honor. The soiled clothing of the poor man earned indifference to his comfort or feelings. He received the options of standing in some undesirable place or sitting on the floor near the greeter. The greeter showed no concern for his needs.

Verse 4 uses a question to accuse the readers of a pair of evil actions. An affirmative answer is expected. They had indeed discriminated and become evil judges. First, they discriminated among themselves. They were guilty of creating divisions in their midst despite the fact that they had accepted the abolition of class distinctions (see Gal. 3:28). Second, they acted like evil-minded or prejudiced judges, regulating their conduct by blatantly false principles.

They practiced a favoritism toward the rich inconsistent with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for all people. If they continued to practice it, they could not claim to be followers of the Lord who abolished partiality. Deuteronomy 10:17 shows that God practices no partiality. Surely he could not tolerate such action among his own children. A wide difference separated the faith they professed from their partisan practices. We can apply this warning in our relationships with different races, social classes, or economic groups.

2:5–6a. Partiality is contrary to God's plan and threatening to the best interests of believers. James contrasted God's exaltation of the poor with their abuse by his readers. Their practice of discrimination against the poor was contrary to the way God had purposed to treat them. Verse 5 shows how God views the poor. Verse 6a presents the contrasting practices of his readers. It is clear: Christians need to adopt God's outlook for the poor. God chose the poor. Paul used "chose" to describe the election of believers to salvation (Eph. 1:4). In James 2:5 "chose" describes spiritual blessings God has reserved for the poor. God chose the poor to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him.

The world may look on poverty-stricken people as insignificant and worthless. God sees them as abounding in the riches of faith. Their faith allows them to experience God's wealth—salvation and its accompanying blessings. This does not suggest all the poor are converted, nor does it mean God practices a bias against those who are not poor. The poor God blesses are those whose poverty is primarily to be "poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3). Often those who are economically poor are better placed than the wealthy to understand God's purposes. They are more likely than the rich to be prospects for conversion. The kingdom is the full manifestation of Christ's future kingdom at the end of the age. The poor may appear insignificant in this world, but they have the glorious hope of inheriting the kingdom with Jesus (see Matt. 25:34). God loves the poor more than their treatment by Christians indicates. Verse 6a outlines the church's treatment of the poor. They had insulted the poor by asking them to stand in some uncomfortable location or to sit on the floor as the Christians gathered for worship. Such shabby treatment could convince the poor that Christianity was not for them.

2:6b–7. The actions of the Christians did not help their own interests. They were pursuing a path of folly. Their treatment of the rich and the poor resembled honoring an executioner while insulting a valued friend. The rich faced three charges. First, they were exploiting the poor by social and economic mistreatment. James 5:4 accuses the wealthy of failing to pay past-due wages. It was a strange twist of circumstances to honor such abusive masters. Second, the rich hauled believers into court and practiced judicial persecution. Notice the actions of the wealthy slaveowners who dragged Paul and Silas into court in Acts 16:19–21. Third, they belittled the Lord Jesus by insulting his person and rejecting his claims. The Jews of Antioch showed this behavior in Acts 13:45. These whom the church welcomed were not Christians but wealthy, Christ-rejecting Jews. The readers of James belonged to Jesus, and their biased actions dishonored his honorable name.

2:8. James designated the command to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18) as the royal law. He may have used the term royal because Christ, the true king, set forth the law (Matt. 22:39). In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) Jesus defined a neighbor and discussed the demands of loving a neighbor. Jesus defined a neighbor as anyone in need. He urged us to show our love to neighbors by responding to their needs. Some of James's readers felt they had been obedient to God in the matter of showing love for the poor and needy. Wherever that was true, James gave credit. If they were really putting God's law into practice, this was noble and commendable. The command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves is an impossible standard without the power of the living Christ (John 13:34–35). Whenever Christians have applied this standard, it has remade communities, societies, and homes. Whoever follows this life of service will receive the Lord's commendation at the final judgment (Matt. 25:21).

2:9–11. This section deplores the violation of the royal law. If the readers truly practiced favoritism, they committed sin and stood convicted as lawbreakers. Leviticus 19:15 had warned against the practice of favoritism, against either the poor or the rich. It appealed for fair treatment of our neighbors. Lawbreakers describes persons who have stepped over a line or a limit. Lawbreakers had mockingly stepped over God's boundaries and performed a forbidden practice.

Verse 10 shows why those who practice partiality are lawbreakers. Some Jews saw God's law as containing many detached requirements forbidding such actions as murder, adultery, and robbery. They failed to see its unity. They may have felt that strict obedience at one point would compensate for disobedience elsewhere. God's Law is not like a setup of ten bowling pins which we knock down one at a time. It more resembles a pane of glass in which a break at one point means that the entire pane is broken. The primary application of verse 10 was to one who showed partiality for the rich over the poor. Violating this single commandment made a person a lawbreaker. We should apply the statement of verse 10 in other areas where we are tempted to praise ourselves for obedience at one point while neglecting to consider the points where we grievously disobey God's teachings.

2:12–13. These verses conclude the discussion of partiality by appealing for obedience to the royal law in both speech and action. Those who judge others often forget that they must face God's judgment. The reality of God's coming judgment is an incentive for Christians to speak and act obediently. The standard of judgment in that day will be the law that gives freedom. This is a reference to the gospel (see also James 1:25 and the discussion of the term under "Deeper Discoveries" in chapter 1). In John 8:32–36 Jesus had described the gospel as a truth which sets people free. James echoed these words in verse 12. Those who obey God by faith in Jesus Christ find freedom to serve God and escape from fear of future judgment. Faith in Jesus Christ provides freedom to escape hatred and self-love and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

James alluded to the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:7 to warn that those who show no mercy will receive none in the final judgment. Stated positively, this means mercy triumphs over judgment. This does not mean we receive mercy from God only when we show mercy to others. If that were true, it would make salvation a matter of God's payment for our good deeds. For those who have given themselves in faith to Christ, God's mercy triumphs over our guilt and judgment. If we have received God's grace, we will stand in the coming judgment. Mercy can rejoice in its victory over condemnation.