SESSION 3

THE PRESSURE OF PARTIALITY
The Point
God does not play favorites and neither should I.

The Bible Meets Life
It’s only natural that we gravitate to people who are like us. It’s easier to interact with people with whom we share a common interest or background. The problem arises when that drives us to show preferential treatment. Playing favorites, though, is not limited to those who are “just like us.” We can also show preferential treatment to those who can benefit us socially, politically, or financially. Jesus, on the other hand, treated all people the same. Scripture calls us to treat people as Jesus does.

The Passage
James 2:1-13

The Setting
James instructed his readers to reject the practice of showing favoritism. By giving preferential treatment to the wealthy, believers were dishonoring the poor. James wrote that God honors the poor who love Him, and he offered Old Testament proof that to show favoritism based on wealth or status is sin.
James 2:1-13 (HCSB)

1 My brothers, do not show favoritism as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. 2 For example, a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor man dressed in dirty clothes also comes in. 3 If you look with favor on the man wearing the fine clothes and say, “Sit here in a good place,” and yet you say to the poor man, “Stand over there,” or, “Sit here on the floor by my footstool,” 4 haven’t you discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

5 Listen, my dear brothers: Didn’t God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that He has promised to those who love Him? 6 Yet you dishonored that poor man. Don’t the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? 7 Don’t they blaspheme the noble name that was pronounced over you at your baptism?

8 Indeed, if you keep the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well. 9 But if you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking it all. 11 For He who said, Do not commit adultery, also said, Do not murder. So if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you are a lawbreaker. 12 Speak and act as those who will be judged by the law of freedom. 13 For judgment is without mercy to the one who hasn’t shown mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.
GET INTO THE STUDY

DISCUSS: the opening question on page 29 of the Personal Study Guide (PSG): “Who or what does society value most?”

SAY: “We value a variety of things. Some things we value can affect how we treat people, for better or for worse.”

GUIDE: Engage learners in identifying ways someone might show favoritism starting with the example in “The Bible Meets Life” section on page 30 of the PSG.

SUMMARIZE: Discrimination too often raises its ugly head through Christians. But discrimination has no place in church or anywhere in our lives. Why? The ground at the foot of the cross is level. God plays no favorites and neither should we.

ENHANCEMENT: Use Pack Item 1: “Pressure Points” to recognize what makes us feel the pressure of favoritism.

TRANSITION: Let’s recognize places where we might be playing favorites and consider what James teaches us about the proper response.

PRAY: Lead a prayer thanking God for the good we can choose by refusing favoritism.
James 2:1-4

1 My brothers, do not show favoritism as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. 2 For example, a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor man dressed in dirty clothes also comes in. 3 If you look with favor on the man wearing the fine clothes and say, “Sit here in a good place,” and yet you say to the poor man, “Stand over there,” or, “Sit here on the floor by my footstool,” 4 haven’t you discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

READ: James 2:1-4 on page 31 of the PSG.

SAY: “Refusing favoritism means more than just welcoming people with a handshake. God commands us to show love genuinely and repeatedly without partiality.”

GUIDE: Prompt group members to consider privately their biases, outer trappings or other leanings that might prompt them to favor or disfavor a certain someone. Note, for example, that some of us are biased against the rich and powerful while others are biased toward them.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 32 of the PSG: “What kinds of experiences affect who we want to be around?”

SUMMARIZE: When we show favoritism, we become judges with evil thoughts. We hurt not only people, but we also hurt God’s heart.

TRANSITION: Favoritism says more about us than about the people toward whom we show favoritism. Verses 5-7 show us what impartiality tells us about God’s heart.
James 2:1-4 Commentary

James’s command to not show favoritism was directed to people with faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. James did not address the entire Roman Empire or the whole world. He wrote specifically to believers. Partiality may be the norm in the culture at large, but it is still wrong. Even more powerfully, believers have a special framework for thinking and talking. We confess that Jesus is incomparably glorious with supreme authority as Lord of His people. Our convictions, conversations, and conduct fall under His command in light of His glory.

Outward appearance often triggers favoritism. What can be signaled and seen outwardly? Political party affiliation may show in a campaign button or a bumper sticker. Ethnicity may show in distinctive clothing or accent. Poverty and wealth can show quickly in clothing, accessories, hairstyles, or even conversation.

James specifically highlighted favoritism based on wealth and poverty. He gave an example of two men coming into your meeting and being received quite differently. The meeting could have been for worship or discussion of the gospel. The meeting could have been with inquirers or for another purpose. The important point is that believers were in charge and responsible for accommodating those who attended. A man enters. His gold ring and fine clothes—literally, “shining” (Greek: lampros)—make it obvious the man has plenty of money. Then, in comes another man. He wears poor clothes. He has no ring. He has probably come in from a hard, sweaty day’s work in the fields. He has little, if any, money and his appearance announces the fact.

What should determine how believers relate to these two men? It should be their faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. The glory of the Lord Jesus Christ is greater, and kinder, than the glory of a rich man’s shining clothes and ring. Typical rules of culture are not supreme in a meeting over which believers have charge. The lordship of Christ sets the norms for believers’ behavior. Even so, believers in this group chose to give favor to the rich man. They placed the favor squarely upon the rich man and away from the poor man. They dishonored both the poor man and God Himself. The rich man’s shining appearance caught the eyes that should have been fixed on the glorious Lord Jesus.

Believers encouraged the rich man to sit in a good seat. The good seat, surely convenient and comfortable, would have been a place of status and honor. By contrast, they told the poor man to stand out of the way, inconspicuously, in a place that fit his insignificance. If the poor many must 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.
James 2:5-7

5 Listen, my dear brothers: Didn’t God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that He has promised to those who love Him? 6 Yet you dishonored that poor man. Don’t the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? 7 Don’t they blaspheme the noble name that was pronounced over you at your baptism?

READ: Ask a volunteer to read James 2:5-7 on page 31 of the PSG while the rest of the group listens for how favoritism hurts everybody.

GUIDE: Call attention to page 33 of the PSG for some of the problems with favoritism. Contrast this with the way the church in Kentucky treated all with impartiality. Identify other actions that would show impartiality.

ENHANCEMENT: Display Pack Item 2: “Welcome” to notice actions we take to welcome people into our homes. Apply these actions to welcoming people into friendships. Include that we, the body of Christ, can impact the culture with our impartial treatment of people.

GUIDE: Ask group members to read again verses 5-7 and consider what this passage says about the heart of God.

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 33 of the PSG: “Why is the heart of God so close to those who are poor and excluded?” Expand the discussion to why we’d want to match God’s heart.

TRANSITION: Partiality is not in God’s heart and verses 8-13 show us that it also goes against His standard for us.
James 2:5-7 Commentary

James rhetorically inquired: haven’t you discriminated among yourselves? The expected answer was “Yes.” The believers had wrongly made divisions among people. In so doing, they had become judges with evil thoughts. Their evil thoughts and wrong motives drove their judgments. Perhaps they thought, If I treat this man with special respect now, he may favor me in the future. If I don’t, he may resent it. Or, If this man comes fully into the church, that could mean a lot to us financially.

The divisions we make among people reflect divisions in our minds and hearts. We need to pray, “Give me an undivided mind” so we might “fear Your name” (Ps. 86:11). Fearing God includes going His way. Partiality is not God’s way. Indeed, there is no favoritism with God (see Rom. 2:11; Deut. 10:17-18; Gal. 2:6; Eph. 6:9). Jesus “gave Himself” as a “ransom for all” (1 Tim. 2:6). The gospel is for people of all nations, all ethnic groups, all political and religious backgrounds, and all financial levels. All are welcome at the level ground around the cross. God does not play favorites and neither should we.

God chooses the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom (Ps. 113:7-8). The poorest believer is exorbitantly rich as a joint heir with Jesus (see Eph. 1:5-8; Rom. 8:17). Yet believers dishonored the poor man. Ponder the painful contrast: God exalts the poor; yet we often choose to lower them to our feet! Beware, lest you insult someone whose riches far exceed a gold ring and shining clothes.

Whenever believers show favoritism, they contradict God’s choice. The rich can show partiality. Middle-class people can show partiality. The poor can as well. Outward status markers exist in most cultures. But we choose what to do with those markers. 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 (see also Ezek. 22:29; Amos 4:1). Nor were all rich people blasphemers. Joseph of Arimathea was rich and a disciple of Jesus (Matt. 27:57). Since James described the rich as oppressors and blasphemers, it seems likely that he intended his readers to view the rich man in James 2:2-3 as an unbeliever. Perhaps the rich man came to the meeting as an honest inquirer into the gospel. If so, what he needed was not favoritism. VIP seating could not benefit his soul. The rich man also needed insight that rich men and poor men sit side-by-side in God’s kingdom as mere men, equally in need of God’s mercy.
James 2:8-13

8 Indeed, if you keep the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well. 9 But if you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking it all. 11 For He who said, Do not commit adultery, also said, Do not murder. So if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you are a lawbreaker. 12 Speak and act as those who will be judged by the law of freedom. 13 For judgment is without mercy to the one who hasn’t shown mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

READ: James 2:8-11 on page 31 of the PSG.

SAY: “James showed the seriousness of favoritism, naming it as sin and showing its results.”

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 34 of the PSG: “What are examples of showing honor versus playing favorites?”

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 35 of the PSG: “What’s at stake when I play favorites?”

DO: Direct group members’ attention to “Favor a Different Approach” on page 34 of the PSG. Ask them to respond to the three scenarios, based on this passage.

TIP: If one person tends to dominate the conversation, direct questions to specific group members.

Favor a Different Approach

When in a conversation I hear a phrase like “those people” or “they’re not like me,” I will ...

When ridiculing jokes are told, I will ...

When I see someone treating another person as expendable, I will ...

TRANSITION: Let’s wrap up by considering how we can keep favoritism in check in our own lives.
James 2:8-13 Commentary

James did grant the possibility that the believers could have honored the rich man in an effort to keep the royal law. This was an honest rhetorical concession that someone can treat a rich person well with right motives. What is the royal law? It’s God’s full will and intent for His people in Christ Jesus (Matt. 5:17). 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 (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:34-40). Paul echoed Jesus’ teaching (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14) and wrote of fulfilling “the law of Christ” (6:2).

However, special treatment of the rich man (Jas. 2:2-3) did not exemplify love. It showed favoritism and sin against the royal law. Having judged with evil thoughts for the rich over the poor (v. 4), those who showed favoritism were transgressors. 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. Adultery and murder are both weighty sins. So is partiality. Don’t minimize its significance.

As people of faith Jesus (v. 1), we are to speak and act in a manner worthy of His name (v. 7). Faith shows in obedience (vv. 14-18) and we are obligated to show it. We are to speak and act as people who will be judged by the law of freedom. We are not bonded to or enchained by a law of sin. We have been born anew (1:18) and bear the name of the Lord Jesus (2:1,7). We are obligated freedmen. We are freed to serve Christ obediently under the “royal law” and will finally give account to Him for our deeds (Matt. 25:31-32). When all people give account to Him, it will then be evident that judgment is without mercy for the one who hasn’t shown mercy. Some will have testified by their merciless deeds that they neither belong with Jesus (v. 41-45) nor have an inheritance in His kingdom (v. 46). Mercy is faithful love in its many forms. It shows kindness and fair treatment (Zech. 7:9-10).

Failure to show God’s mercy was the issue in James’ favoritism example (Jas. 2:2-3). A judgment took place to devalue the very man whom God valued. Our reasons may be unfamiliarity or the reasons may be deeper and darker. If we fall all over ourselves to accommodate and impress the rich, but insult the poor, we must examine ourselves and bring forth the fruits of repentance.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. Mercy displays our true parentage. We show it because we belong to our Father who has shown it to us. We don’t earn status with God by practicing it. We show that we belong to Him by showing mercy. Mercy will prove to be a powerful witness with full credibility in the heavenly tribunal. If as a child of God you humbly receive God’s mercy in Christ and show mercy to others, then judgment will most assuredly be in your favor. Judgment will bring to light the truth about every person who confesses Jesus as Savior and Lord.
LIVE IT OUT

GUIDE: Call for group members to choose one action from the “Live It Out” section on page 36 of the PSG to help see people as God sees them:

- **Check your attitude.** When you treat someone with partiality, check the attitude of your heart. Confess it to God.

- **Demonstrate God’s love.** Deliberately say a kind word, welcome someone to your table, or build someone up. Go out of your way to care.

- **Build a friendship.** Spend time with someone you wouldn’t typically relate to.

Wrap It Up

**SAY:** “No matter what happens around you, refuse to play favorites. **Value what God values and love indiscriminately.**”
My group’s prayer requests

Additional suggestions for specific groups (women, men, parents, boomers, and singles) are available at BibleStudiesforLife.com/blog.

Hand in Hand

In his song “My Own Little World,” artist Matthew West swallows hard about living where things run smoothly and he never feels material want. A world where the population, he confesses, consists entirely of “me.” Many of us have felt this same angst, and some volunteers from Durham, N.C., are doing something about it.

To continue reading “Hand in Hand” from More Living magazine, visit BibleStudiesforLife.com/articles.