

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

DISCUSS: Draw attention to the picture on **PSG page 26** and ask **Question 1: When have you felt like “the new kid”?**

GUIDE: Refer group members to “**The Bible Meets Life,**” (**PSG, p. 27**), to the author’s description of moving to a new place, and how you acclimate yourself to your new surroundings.

SAY: “Today we will consider how it feels for someone who comes to our church for the first time, where everything is new and different.”

GUIDE: Introduce **The Point** on **PSG page 27: Welcoming others goes beyond a friendly handshake.**

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to help us really care about guests who come to our church, reach beyond those to whom we are familiar, and with open arms love all people who come our way.

SESSION 2 OPEN ARMS



The Point

Welcoming others goes beyond a friendly handshake.

The Bible Meets Life

It’s only natural that we gravitate to the people we know best and those who are like us. It’s easier to interact with people with whom we share a common interest

or background. The problem arises when those friendships drive us to overlook others, ignore them, or worse, show preferential treatment. Jesus, on the other hand, loves all people the same. Scripture calls us to see people as Jesus does.

The Passage

James 2:1-10

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 poor when they visited this group of believers.

James 2:1-4

- 1 My brothers and sisters, do not show favoritism as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.
- 2 For if someone comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor person dressed in filthy clothes also comes in,
- 3 if you look with favor on the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Sit here in a good place," and yet you say to the poor person, "Stand over there," or "Sit here on the floor by my footstool,"
- 4 haven't you made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

KEY WORD: **Favoritism** (v. 1)—The displaying of preferential treatment to a person (or persons) not shown to others.

1 ▶ 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 and sisters**. James admonished them not to show **favoritism**. The word literally means receiving or lifting the face. In ancient times, subjects would prostrate themselves before their ruler when seeking his favor. If the ruler received or lifted their faces, they would be heard. The word came to mean showing favor on improper grounds, such as favoring the wealthy, high class, and or powerful over those who do not possess such standing or material wealth.

In both the Old and New Testaments, God commands His people not to show favoritism (Lev. 19:15; Col. 3:11). Showing favoritism is particularly incompatible with those who have been redeemed by grace through faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ (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 favoritism to some at the expense of others. Outward appearances often serve to trigger such

STUDY THE BIBLE

James 2:1-4



10 minutes

SUMMARIZE: Before reading the passage, refer to "**The Bible Meets Life**" and "**The Setting**" on page 28 to establish the context of the passage.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read James 2:1-4.

GUIDE: Use the **KEY WORD (PSG, p. 28)** to explain the meaning of *favoritism*.

GUIDE: Refer to **PSG pages 28-29** to show three reasons James taught that showing partiality was an evil thing to do.

1. *Partiality neglects the image of God in fellow humans.*
2. *Partiality sees others as objects to be used.*
3. *Partiality sets us up as judge.*

SUMMARIZE: Refer to **Bible Commentary 1** to provide further explanation of *favoritism* and why God has commanded His people not to show favoritism.

SUMMARIZE: Refer to **Bible Commentary 2** to provide further explanation to the distinctions people made between how they treat those who are rich and poor based on:

- *Symbols of wealth*
- *Attire*
- *Appearance*

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY: Write the following list on a white board or poster board prior to your gathering or create the list as a handout for each group member:

- ___ Age ___
 ___ Gender ___
 ___ Race ___
 ___ Marital Status ___
 ___ Economic Status ___
 ___ Education ___
 ___ Political Affiliation ___
 ___ Personal Appearance ___
 ___ Accent ___
 ___ Size of House ___
 ___ Career ___

Ask group members to place an X on the left side of the list beside any of the things they have used to make judgments about others. On the right side of the list, place a check mark beside the things others have used to make a judgment about them.

favoritism. 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 meeting** and being received differently. The meeting 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.

2 ▶ A man entered. His **gold ring and fine clothes**—literally, “shining,” made it obvious the man was wealthy. Then, in came another man. He wore **filthy clothes**. The term for *filthy* means dirty, and is also used in the New Testament with the meaning of contaminated or defiled (Rev. 22:11). 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 footstool.

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 with foot rests for their feet, while the poor are on the floor, that’s a problem.

3 ▶ **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 (1 John 2:15-17).

What evil thoughts might drive partiality for the rich over the poor? We might think, “If I treat this man with special respect now, he may have favor on 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 and in our community standing.” Or even, “Rich people are just more important than poor people.”

The divisions we make among people reflect divisions in our minds and hearts. If we are divided between devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ and devotion to the standards of the world, we need to pray, “Give me an undivided mind” so we might “fear your name” (Ps. 86:11). Fearing God includes desiring and living according to His ways rather than the culture’s.

Partiality is not God’s way. Indeed, there is no favoritism with God (Deut. 10:17-18; Rom. 2:11; Gal. 2:6; Eph. 6:9). Jesus Christ does not play favorites. 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 who repent and place their faith in Jesus Christ are welcome at the level ground around the cross. God does not play favorites and neither should we! ◀

James 2:5-7

5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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 have dishonored the poor. Don’t the rich oppress you and drag you into court?

7 Don’t they blaspheme the good name that was invoked over you?

Verse 5. With his words, James was attempting to communicate to his readers that partiality neglects God’s heart. James again identified himself with his readers and showed his love and concern for them by calling them **my dear brothers and sisters**. Furthermore, James

SAY: “Partiality is not God’s way. There is no favoritism with God.”

SUMMARIZE: Refer to **Bible Commentary 3** to provide further explanation about the dangers inherent when showing favoritism.

DISCUSS: Question #2 (PSG, p. 29): What are some ways we might be tempted to show favoritism today?

Alternate: What makes preferential treatment so dangerous?

TRANSITION: “In the next verses, we will discover how God has special concern for the poor of the world.”

STUDY THE BIBLE James 2:5-7



10 minutes

READ: Read James 2:5-7.

GUIDE: Make the point that when we adopt an attitude of favoritism, we are neglecting God's heart of grace in at least three ways (**PSG, p. 31**):

1. Favoritism makes assumptions based on external appearance.
2. Favoritism focuses on what we receive rather than what we can give.
3. Favoritism minimizes the power of grace.

SUMMARIZE: Refer to **Bible Commentary 4** to provide further insight regarding God's special concern for the poor.

READ: Read or ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 for the apostle Paul's perspective on how God's standards are different from the world's standards.

called his readers' attention to an important truth with his command to **listen** to what he was about to say.

4 ▶ James again asked a rhetorical question, to which the expected answer was "Yes!" **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?** God has a special concern for the **poor** (Ex. 22:21-24; Ps. 68:5; Isa. 1:17; Jas. 1:27), and He expects His people to share that same concern. He demonstrated His love for the poor by including them in the new birth that comes by repentance and faith in Jesus Christ (Jas. 1:9,12). This does not mean all poor people are or will be saved. Many never turn to Christ, but God has drawn multitudes from among the world's poor to receive salvation.

God chooses the poor **to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom**. The kingdom is "the kingdom of God." "The kingdom of God was the focus of Jesus' preaching. He presented himself as the one through whom God's reign was even then being realized (Mt. 12:28; Mk. 1:15; Lk. 17:21). But the fullness of its power and the riches of its blessings are still future" (Matt. 25:31-34).²

The psalmist writes of God's special concern for and care of the poor: "He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the trash heap" that He might seat them among His people (Ps. 113:7-8). The poorest believer is exorbitantly rich as a joint heir with Jesus (Rom. 8:17; Eph. 1:5-8). That is God's choice! ◀

The apostle Paul noted in his first letter to the Corinthians that God's standards are not the world's standards:

"Brothers and sisters, consider your calling: Not many were wise from a human perspective, not many powerful, not many of noble birth. Instead, God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God has chosen what is insignificant and despised in the world—what is viewed as nothing—to bring to nothing what is viewed as something, so that no one may boast in his presence" (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

5 ▶ Verses 6. Yet believers in James’s hypothetical example **dishonored** the poor man. We should pause to ponder the painful contrast: 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. 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 (Ezek. 22:29; Amos 4:1). One commentator suggests that in their preferential treatment toward the rich man, the congregation was in fact becoming a party to the oppression of the poor by the rich, condoning such behavior by their own neglect of the poor man.³ ◀

6 ▶ Verses 7. James also charged that the rich **blaspheme** Jesus’ name. The Greek word translated *blaspheme* means to slander or defame someone. In reference to God it means to be irreverent. Again, not all rich people were blasphemers. Joseph of Arimathea was rich and a disciple of Jesus (Matt. 27:57), but many rich and powerful people in the first century did despise and insult Jesus. To them, Jesus’ crucifixion was not 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.

Since James described the rich as oppressors and blasphemers, it seems likely that he intended his readers

SUMMARIZE: Refer to **Bible Commentary 5** to show how believers who showed favoritism to the rich dishonored the poor man. Note the irony: believers showed partiality to the rich who oppressed God’s people and blasphemed the name of Jesus.

SUMMARIZE: Refer to **Bible Commentary 6** on this page and page 34 to provide explanation about the word *blaspheme* and the connection to the rich whom James refers to in this passage.

DISCUSS: Question #3 (PSG, p. 32): How can we avoid showing partiality between types of people?

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

TRANSITION: “In the next verses, James explained that if you love your neighbor as yourself, you do well. But to show favoritism is sin.”

STUDY THE BIBLE

James 2:8-10



15 minutes

READ: Read or invite a group member to read James 2:8-10.

GUIDE: Use the **KEY WORDS** (PSG, p. 32) to explain the meaning of the phrase *royal law*.

SUMMARIZE: Refer to **Bible Commentary 7** on this page and page 35 to provide further explanation to the phrase *royal law*.

READ: Enlist three volunteers to read the following passages to reinforce teaching about the *royal law*:

- *Leviticus 19:18*
- *Matthew 22:37-40*
- *Galatians 5:13-14*

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. What he needed was humility in light of the glory and authority of Jesus. He needed to recognize that Christ crucified was God’s wisdom and power for his salvation. The rich man also needed the 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 2:8-10

8 Indeed, if you fulfill the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well.

9 If, however, you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

10 For whoever keeps the entire law, and yet stumbles at one point, is guilty of breaking it all.

KEY WORDS: 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.)

Verse 8. Partiality is inconsistent with love. However, 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. This was an honest rhetorical concession that someone can treat a rich person well with right motives if they treat the poor person with equal welcome and attentiveness. In such a case, this congregation would have been **doing well** in obedience to God’s standards and His commands. James did not, however, develop his example of favoritism to illustrate faithfulness to the royal law, but violation of it.

7 ▶ What is the **royal law**? The Greek term translated **royal** means “regal” and literally refers to anything belonging to a king. The Greek term for **law** describes the Mosaic law and the Old Testament itself. So, what did

James mean when he wrote of the royal law? It is the law of God that Jesus fulfilled (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 **prescribed in 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 (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:34-40). Paul echoed Jesus' teaching:

“For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal. 5:14).

(see also Rom. 13:8-10). Paul also wrote of fulfilling “the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). ◀

8 ▶ Verse 9. Special treatment of the rich man (Jas. 2:2-3) did not exemplify the exercise of the royal law. Rather, the actions of the church were an example of **favoritism** and a very definite **sin** against the royal law. The Greek term for *sin* is derived from a word meaning “to miss the mark.” As used in the New Testament, the term translated *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 by choosing the rich man over the poor man (v. 4), those who showed favoritism were **convicted by the law as transgressors**. Those who judged others were now judged as transgressors themselves! The Greek term for *transgressors* can also be translated as “law breakers.” The word comes from a Greek term meaning “to deviate from or violate a command.” ◀

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? That's not the right question. Underlying it probably is the hope that if I show partiality, it's not like I've robbed a bank or something. In that line of thinking, partiality is not “really serious” and, therefore, it's not so bad, is it?

9 ▶ James reasoned, however, that if a believer fails in just **one point** to keep the royal law, he 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

SUMMARIZE: Refer to **Bible Commentary 8** to explain that showing favoritism is a sin against the royal law. To sin means:


- *To miss the mark.*
- *To deviate from or violate a command.*

SAY: “We love others because we are 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.”

GUIDE: Refer group members to the bulleted list on **PSG page 33** that describes reasons why we fail to love others:

- *We judge because we perceive we are judged.*
- *We criticize because we perceive we are criticized.*
- *We hate because we perceive we are hated.*
- *We play favorites because we see we are victims of partiality.*

SUMMARIZE: Use Bible

Commentary  on page 35 and this page to explain that if a believer fails in just one point of the royal law, he is guilty of breaking it all. The law is a whole. We do not pick and choose what commands to obey.

DISCUSS: Question #4 (PSG, p. 33): What is the connection between our relationship with God and our relationship with others?

DISCUSS: Question #5 (PSG, p. 34): What can we learn from James 2:1-10 about becoming a more welcoming group?

Alternate: What are some reasons why favoritism is irreconcilable with love?

DO: Encourage group members to take a few minutes to complete the activity and share responses to “No Partiality” on PSG page 34.

and reject our Lord’s all-encompassing authority. From this verse, a person might conclude that the royal law is a list of do’s 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 freedom” (Jas. 2:12). 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 be free, brothers and sisters; only don’t use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal. 5:13-14).

Paul echoed the words of the Lord Jesus Himself, who when asked by an expert in the Mosaic law what command was the greatest, replied,

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands” (Matt. 22:37-40).

The Christian life isn’t about keeping a list of rules. It’s about love. God is love (1 John 4:8) and He demonstrated His love for us by sending His Son Jesus Christ into the world to redeem us (vv. 9-10). Because God has poured His love out on us in Christ, we are to show that same love to both our brothers and sisters in Christ (vv. 16-21) and to the lost as well (Mark 16:15-16). Jesus stated that the love believers show for one another would be the primary characteristic identifying them as His disciples (John 13:34-35). So, as believers, if we love God, love our brothers and sisters in the faith, and love our neighbors, we will be doing well in fulfilling the royal law of love. ◀

1. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, vol. 16 in Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 88.
2. *Ibid.*, 91.3. Kurt A. Richardson, *James*, vol. 36 in The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 111-12.

LIVE IT OUT

It's always easier to surround ourselves with the familiar, whether it's the grocery store we patronize regularly or people with whom we are friends. But showing favoritism neglects the heart of God and fails to recognize the grace that has been shown to us. Thus, 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.

- ▶ **Pray.** Pray that God would bring you in contact with someone who looks, talks, or thinks differently than you do.
- ▶ **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; get 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.

LIVE IT OUT



5 minutes

GUIDE: Emphasize **The Point:**
Welcoming others goes beyond a friendly handshake.

REVIEW: Review **Live It Out (PSG, p. 35)**; (see text to the left). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

WRAP IT UP

GUIDE: Remind group members that God has commanded us to love Him with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love others as we love ourselves.

PRAY: "Father, help us to see all others with Your eyes and to love them as we love ourselves."



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