Session 4: James 2:1–13

OPEN

Who's the most famous person you've ever met?

How did this happen?

How did you react to this person?

READ

Read James 2:1–13.

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 4: *James 2:1–13* (7 minutes).

DISCUSS

Okay, let's be honest. Suppose the scene described in verses 2–3 were to happen this week in our church. **What do you think would happen? How would we treat the two people differently?**

***Why* would we do what we do?**

What does James have to say about this?

Let's look at this practically. Think of all that a rich person can contribute to the church. You could fund all sorts of new ministries. **Wouldn't it make sense to provide first-class treatment, so the rich person would want to come back and maybe become a member and maybe give money and maybe bring a lot of rich friends?**

Why isn't James considering that argument?

GO DEEPER

Learn more about favoritism in the following Bible passages.
Luke 7:36–50; Luke 14:7–11 Acts 10:34–35

In Luke 7, what was the Pharisee's attitude toward the "sinful woman"? Do you think this was reasonable? What point did Jesus make?

In Luke 14, what does Jesus say about social occasions and social status?

In Acts 10, when Peter says that God does not show favoritism, what does he mean?

In James 2:5–7, what does it say about the poor and the rich?

It's not clear exactly what James is referring to, regarding lawsuits and blasphemy. Since this is a general epistle, to people in many different places, he must be writing about a general pattern of behavior rather than a specific lawsuit. It's not hard to imagine that wealthy people—landlords, business owners, etc.—routinely used the courts to protect and build their assets at the expense of the poor, even in the Christian community. Old Testament prophets mentioned legal corruption that favored the rich (Isaiah 1:23; Amos 5:12). The apostle Paul told the Corinthian Christians not to take each other to court, but to settle disputes fairly among themselves (1 Corinthians 6:1–6). The reference to blasphemy might be based on Jesus' identification with the poor. Mistreatment of the poor is not just a crime against humans, but a sin against the Lord, who stands with them (see Proverbs 14:31; Matthew 25:40).

Do you think the poor are really rich in faith? Why would James say that?

How does this connect with the previous point about favoritism?

Do you think James is promoting a "reverse favoritism," in which we welcome and honor the poor more than the rich?

GO DEEPER

Learn more about the poor and the rich in the following Bible passage:
Luke 6:20–26; Matthew 25:31–46; Matthew 19:16–26; Matthew 6:24; 1 Timothy 6:6–10, 17–19.

Based on these passages, what's the problem with wealth? What advantage do the poor have?

If you have money, how can you keep yourself from loving it, serving it, or trusting in it?

What is the "royal law" James mentions in verse 8?

Why does he call it that?

How does showing favoritism break that law?

According to verses 10–12, how would James respond to someone who said, "I've kept seven of the Ten Commandments. That's a passing grade, right?"

According to that standard, are you a "transgressor" of the law? How do you feel about that? Does that seem harsh to you?

GO DEEPER

Compare this view of the law to three others. Matthew 5:19, 21–22, 48 (and the verses in between, if you like); Romans 2:1–3; Galatians 3:10.

Is the point that James makes significantly different from the points in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) or in Paul's letters to the Romans or Galatians?

If it is so difficult to keep God's law perfectly, can we ever please Him?

In James 2:12, James speaks again of the "law of liberty" (see 1:25). But his previous comments seem to be more restrictive, forcing us to keep every point in the law. **How does the law give us freedom?**

Two key words appear in verse 13. Let's define them. **What is judgment? What is mercy?**

How does the idea of mercy bring us back to the matter of showing favoritism?

In the video, Francis Chan said this,

> The good news is that we can be called sons and daughters of the living God! And if He's shown us that kind of mercy, then we should be out doing that for others. The last thing we should be doing is showing favoritism—"Let me look for the people that I really like and show favors to them." James says no, let me live a life that reflects the gospel, meeting people that I wouldn't normally associate with, people who have nothing to offer me. Let me just love them like crazy, like God did for me.

Does that make sense to you?

Is there anything you would add?

LAST WORD

This passage is about two things. Once you think you know what it's about, James goes somewhere else, and then he circles back to the start. He is writing to very religious people—remember that. In fact, they likely have a background in two religions: Judaism and Christianity. They have already been taught to live by the law of God and the teachings of Jesus. They're not murderers and thieves. They have "respectable" sins. In this way, they're probably a lot like us.

We can figure out from this letter what the problems were. Those people gossiped sometimes. They got angry with one another. And when a rich person showed up at the church door, they shoved poor folks

aside to clear the path.

So that's the first challenge James offers in this chapter: Do we show favoritism?

It's natural to get nervous around celebrities [as we learned in today's opening question]. No one would blame us for favoring the rich folks who show up to worship with us. It's normal behavior. Except it goes against all the truth of God. The rich don't deserve special treatment; in fact, the poor do. Doesn't the kingdom of God belong to them?

That's the first thing this passage is about: *favoritism*. But then James jumps to a second point—*lawbreaking*.

He addresses his very religious readers and says, "You are lawbreakers. If you have ever said an unkind thing, if you have ever cursed the chariot driver who cut you off on the Appian Way, and if you have ever shown favoritism—then you're no better than a murderer. You have broken God's law. You deserve his judgment."

For centuries, Christian scholars have set up a debate between James and Paul. We'll get into that more next time as James teaches about faith and works, but here James sounds very much like Paul. All of us have sinned, even religious folks. All deserve judgment. But guess what, God offers you mercy, so receive it. His mercy triumphs over judgment.

And once we realize how much we depend on God's mercy, it's hard to show favoritism to the rich. Instead, we value the poor, because they have mastered the one thing God wants above all else: relying on Him for everything they have.

LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Memorization: Learn the Beatitudes. Matthew 5:3–12 or Luke 6:20–26. In a succinct way, these describe the reordering of the world from God's perspective.

Seek counsel: If you have been working hard to keep God's rules, and you're troubled by this assertion that breaking even one command makes you a lawbreaker, talk with a pastor or teacher about this. Ask how to unpack the idea of God's "mercy."

Evaluation: If you are in a position of authority in the church, take this opportunity to evaluate the church's response to visitors— not just the stated policies, but the actual behaviors. Is favoritism shown? If so, what can you do about it?

Serving: Can you get involved in a ministry to the poor and homeless in your community? Many such ministries need volunteers and financial support. If you can't find one to connect with, perhaps you could start one.