

James 2:1-13 ~ Favoritism Forbidden ~ Leader's Guide

Note to leader: Be sure to allow ample time to discuss Question 16. The issue of our works being judged is incredibly important to understand and likely to cause discussion..

1a. To who was James writing and how does he describe them?

We know from James 1:1 that he was writing primarily to the early Jewish Christians who he further addresses in Verse 2:1 as “my brothers, believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

1b. What was their economic situation?

Probably ran the whole gamut from rich to poor. There is no reason to think that all (or most) of the early Jewish Christians were wealthy, particularly those that were scattered in Asia and Europe.

2. Where is James prohibiting discrimination specifically (vs 2)?

In church meetings, wherever they happen to be held. In general, most early Christians met in homes and there was probably not enough seating for everyone who attended, so some people had to sit on the floor. James in effect is saying, “don’t give a rich man a seat and make a poor man stand in the back or sit on the floor.”

3. Is the church the only place he intends us to welcome the poor?

Absolutely not. By using a church meeting as his example, James is implying that we must not discriminate anyplace on the basis of wealth or class, not at school, at work, in the military, in our neighborhood, in a club, when shopping, or ever.

4. How does the world regard the wealthy vs. the poor?

Obviously, the world regards the wealthy with greater deference and respect. Forbes magazine publishes an annual issue honoring the wealthiest 400 people in the world, Bill Gates’ wealth always puts him in demand as a speaker, and even Christian charities look for well-known, wealthy donors to feature in their promotional appeals.

5. Why would first-century believers find James’ concept revolutionary? (Deuteronomy 7:12-14, Joshua 1:8)

Early Jewish Christians grew up in the Jewish heritage which did, in fact, honor the wealthy. The Jews were God’s chosen people and He promised them wealth if they would simply follow His laws. (Deut 7:12-14, Joshua 1:8) Now James is saying that because of Christ, everyone is all of a sudden equal. A tough concept to accept by both rich and poor.

6. Is James condemning the wealthy and exalting the poor?

No. He is simple saying to play no favorites. He speaks of favoring the wealthy as just one sin of many. He enlarges on this theme in Chapters 4 and 5.

7. Whose side is God on?

God is on no one's side. God doesn't take sides. God loves us all equally, rich or poor, smart or dumb, healthy or sickly. Don't ever think that God loves poor people more than rich ones or the downtrodden more than the successful. It just isn't so.

8. What is the obvious contradiction in Verse 2:5?

The verse says that God has given those who are poor in money riches in faith. Be careful not to misinterpret this to also mean the converse that those who are rich in money are poor in faith. James doesn't say this. What he is saying is that God has promised poor people a share in His kingdom just as He will give to everyone who loves Him.

9. How does one inherit God's Kingdom? (John 1:12)

Accept Jesus and put your faith in Him.

John 1:12 – Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—

10. What is the insult to the poor in Verse 6?

James says that rich people are dragging poor people into court (and suing them) so that, as the saying goes, "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." But, in fact, the real insult is not recognizing that God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in His kingdom.

11. What is the big difference between the society of the first century and that of today in this context, i.e., the rich exploiting and not caring for the poor?

Today we have a social policy -- welfare, food stamps, subsidized housing, etc. -- through which the government takes care of the poor so that others don't have to.

12. Do we experience the prejudice and abuse that James describes in 2:6-7?

Of course. Prejudices between classes, between rich and poor, exist just as much today as they did 2,000 years ago. And as James points out in Verse 7, those who mistreat poor people are slandering the name of God to whom we all belong.

13. Since there was no "social policy" in the first century as there is today, what was James suggesting about the "royal law" in Verse 8? (Matthew 7:12, Leviticus 19:15-18)

In place of a social policy, James admonished his readers to heed the "royal law" or "golden rule" in the scriptures that tells us to do unto others as you would have them do to

you. But even before the teaching of Jesus, this was spelled out in the law of Moses, especially in Leviticus. Specifically, in Leviticus 19:15, Moses says to not show “partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.”

Matthew 7:12 – So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

14. If we show partiality or favoritism based on worldly measures of worth, what do we risk? (Matthew 7:13-14)

In the verses in Matthew (7:13-14) following the setting down of the golden rule, Jesus says that the gate to (eternal) life is very narrow and the road that leads to it is hard to follow. By showing favoritism and not treating others as we would have them treat us, we are breaking the “Royal Law” and potentially going through the gate to destruction.

Matthew 7:13-14 – ¹³“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

15. What is the point of Verse 10? (Matthew 5:18-19)

James is reiterating that by breaking just one part of the law, we are breaking all of it. But he may also be implying that despite our best efforts, we can’t help ourselves from breaking the law from time to time.

Matthew 5:18-19 – ¹⁸I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

16. What does James mean when he says we will be judged by the law that gives freedom? (Matthew 5:17, Deut 11:1, Romans 14:10, 2 Corinthians 5:10)

There are two issues here: first, “the law that gives freedom” and second, judgement.

What about the law? First of all, as Christians, we are saved by God’s free gift (grace) through faith, **not** by keeping the law. However, Jesus said “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Matt 5:17) There are ten places(!) in Deuteronomy where we are commanded to love God, fear God, and obey his commands, e.g., And you shall love the Lord your God and keep his watch and his statutes and his laws and his commands for **all time** (Deut 11:1).

As Christians, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we should joyfully and willingly obey the law. Most (but not all) commentators think that the “law that gives freedom” is the royal law mentioned in Verse 8 (do unto others...). The Jamieson-Fausset-Brown

commentary (1871) says, “the principle of love takes the place of the letter of the law, so that by the Spirit you are free from the yoke of sin, and free to obey by spontaneous instinct.”

The newer IVP Commentary says, “The royal law of loving one’s neighbor as oneself brings freedom to forgive the neighbor’s wrongs, freedom to ask forgiveness for our own wrongs, freedom to accept differences among us and freedom to open ourselves to others. It is freedom from the selfishness that is at the heart of favoritism.” [Much more on line: <http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Jas/Favoritism-Breaks-Law-People>]

The second issue in Verse 12 is judgement. The judgement that James speaks of is **not** for determining your eternal destiny. He is speaking to believers who are already saved, so the judgement he speaks of is for giving rewards (or not) to believers. This judgment is for believers where lives will be reviewed as to their faithfulness and service to the Lord. Your works do not determine whether or not you get into heaven but they do determine where you will reside and what your job will be when you get there. When you show mercy to the poor and needy and handicapped and hurting people around you, it will go a long way in your favor when the Lord reviews your life (see Paul’s further explanations below).

Romans 14:10 – You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat.

1 Corinthians 3:10a-15 – But each one should be careful how he builds.¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.¹² If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw,¹³ his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.¹⁴ If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward.¹⁵ If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

2 Corinthians 5:10 – For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

17. What does James mean when he says, “mercy triumphs over judgement?” (Matthew 5:7, 6:14-15)

If you are merciful, God will be merciful on the Day of Judgement. And vice-versa.

Matthew 5:7 – Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Matthew 6:14-15 –¹⁴ For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.