



# Study Series

James: Week Four

## Bible

James 2:1-13 (NIV)

### Favouritism Forbidden

**1** My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism. **2** Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. **3** If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," **4** have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

**5** Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? **6** But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? **7** Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

**8** If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbour as yourself," you are doing right. **9** But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. 11 For he who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, 13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

## *Sermon Summary*

Having just reminded his readers that 'true religion' involves caring for the marginalised and avoiding pollution from the world, James confronts behaviour that is not the pure and faultless religion that God the Father desires. The issue at stake is favouritism towards the wealthy; something that is widely condemned throughout Scripture (see Leviticus 19:15). The scenario James portrays is probably a judicial one where the church is gathered to judge a dispute between two members (see 1 Corinthians 6:1-6 for evidence that the church did this sort of thing). In this case, the poor man, sitting on the floor, is unlikely to be given a fair hearing and injustice will be more likely. James points out that if they allow this sort of favouritism to infiltrate their community of faith they are acting in ways that are contrary to faith in Jesus.

What needs to be understood is that for James' readers this sort of favouritism was socially acceptable and would have been quite normal. In antiquity honour was the social currency and people would spend money to gain honour. Those who were wealthy often made significant community contributions (building roads, schools, libraries, etc) which brought them social honour. This social norm, however, is anything but normal in the kingdom of heaven.

James, reflecting the teaching of the Old Testament and Jesus, reminds them that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom (see Isaiah 11:3-4; Luke 4:18-19; 6:20). James does include "those who love God" as inheritors of the kingdom, thus opening the door to the wealthy to enter too, but the emphasis is on the poor; those who have no one else to stand with and for them.

Beyond that, he argues, the opposition they are experiencing is from the wealthy; exploiting them, taking them to court, and blaspheming Jesus. Why, James asks, would you favour them? Then, to drive his point home, he reminds them of one of the central commands of Jesus – found in Leviticus 19:18 – to love your neighbour as yourself. Along

with loving God (also found in this passage), this sums up the Law as far as Jesus is concerned. And if James' readers are in any doubt about how serious James sees their favouritism, he reminds them of the unity of the Law; if you break it in even a small way, you break all of it.

And this favouritism is not a small thing. James seems to compare it to murder! James may be suggesting that by showing favouritism to the wealthy, this group are complicit in the deaths the wealthy might have caused. Whatever the detail, James clearly sees their favouritism – socially acceptable, but out of line with the kingdom – as a serious breach of the Law.

He concludes his exhortation by reminding them that they are to judge in accord with the Law (which advocated impartiality) and with mercy. This too reflects the teaching of Jesus (Matthew 5:7; 18:21-35).

For Christians today, especially in the West, we do well to hear James' concerns with favouritism and partiality. Even though we are more attuned to discriminatory language and actions due to our social context, it is still very easy for us to "find in favour" of those who share our values, opinions, and priorities and we are not immune from favouritism. However, there is a deeper issue here that is worth considering. James was confronting a community norm that the believers had imported into the community of faith without realising how significantly it was at odds with the kingdom of heaven. We too have blind spots where we allow community norms into the community of faith without realising how at odds they are. To discern these blind spots is critical for us as a community of faith.

But how do we discern? James suggests two diagnostic patterns. The first is to fix love of God and love of neighbour firmly in our mind as the very core of what we are meant to be about as believers. If we judged all we did in these terms we might more easily see our blind spots. Second, we can seek to live our faith "out loud" in a more active way. This will expose our blind spots, because by living out our faith we invite questions from those around us. As we declare that we love God and others we invite those around us – those of faith in particular – to raise points of inconsistency in our love and force us to confront them. This is not an easy thing to do; we often remain quiet about our faith because we are aware of some of our blind spots already. But to do so will test the sincerity of our faith and our willingness to persevere and come to maturity; the very thing James has been encouraging his readers to do from the beginning of his letter.

# Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: Where in our world have you seen examples of favouritism at work? Take some time to share your observations with the group.
2. Pause to carefully read James chapter 2:1-13. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that 'jump out at you'. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain *why* it jumped out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to that word or phrase. Share what you've been lead to.
3. Verse 6 reinforces the challenge of the Old Testament law, not to dishonour the poor, as well as the danger of being exploited by the rich. Whilst our culture tends to be far more vocal about exploitation, where might our own attitude towards the poor be being influenced by the wealth of others?
4. Love of God and love of neighbour are called the Jesus Creed by Scot McKnight (a biblical commentator). If these became your simple creed what aspects of your life would they change?
5. James is speaking into a culture that were familiar with the Old Testament laws, but they still missed how their cultural pattern prevented them treating the poor as God intended. Why is knowing the law not enough to live as Jesus intends for us to live? What can we do to help move us towards this life?
6. Living our faith out loud invites the continual refining of who we are as followers of Jesus. In what ways does the influence of sin, the world and the Enemy seek to prevent us living this way?

# Prayer

Take some time now to reflect on your answers to question 6. Pray for each other, that the Holy Spirit would help us to resist those influences that prevent us from living our faith out loud.