

STUDY GUIDE

OVERCOMING PREJUDICE THROUGH LOVE JAMES 2:1-13

MAIN POINT

Until we treat others the same regardless of their wealth or race, we will not fulfill the law of love.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

When you see a homeless person begging for money, what are your first thoughts about this person? Why should you give them money? If you don't give them money, why don't you?

If you have ever volunteered at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter, how did that experience affect you? If you have never volunteered, why haven't you?

How do we tend to subconsciously judge people according to looks, whether it be race or how they dress?

Bias is a sneaky thing. We often make judgments on people based on what color they are, how much they weigh, what their hairstyle is, or what kind of clothing they are wearing. If we aren't careful, those biases can lead us to judging people unfairly and harshly before we even have the opportunity to get to know them. We know that God told Samuel, "Man does not see what the LORD sees, for man sees what is visible, but the LORD sees the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). We should always remember that every person is made in the image of God, and because of this, they deserve our respect and honorable treatment.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 2:1-7

Can you name a time when the church showed favoritism? Have you ever experienced prejudice in the church for yourself or seen it happen to others?

What are the long-term consequences for people when the church is prejudiced?

Why is it a mistake for the church to value the rich over the poor (or the poor over the rich)?

Does our church have a benevolence ministry to the poor? Do you think a poor person would feel comfortable in our congregation if they were to attend?

Aren't we all beggars before God? What do we have that God doesn't supply?

James wouldn't have mentioned this precaution against prejudice if it weren't a problem. It is tempting to view others only in terms of what they offer us. We see the poor and we think that they will be bad givers, that they will actually be takers, and instead of being a helpful addition to the church they will be a drain.

But James reminds us that this is often not the case. Very often, it is the 'wealthy' that gave the church problems. They were taking Christians to court, and the powerful were the ones persecuting the church, not the lowly. On the other hand, just because someone is poor does not mean that they cannot contribute their gifts and talents to the church. After all, our own Lord Jesus was homeless! He told the people, "Foxes have dens and the birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head" (Matthew 8:20).

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 2:8-11.

How is it that if we break only one law, we have broken them all?

What are the two greatest commandments? How might those relate to James' point in this situation?

How is it that rejecting someone based on prejudice is a failure to love?

If we break any law of God, then we are convicted by God as being lawbreakers. All of us, everyone in the world, is a lawbreaker. We are all sinners. James tells us here that it doesn't matter if we are poor or rich or white or black, we are all in the same boat as sinners, so there is no reason to prefer one person over another. As Paul teaches us, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Instead of treating people differently, we ought to remember that everyone is made in the image of God, that they can be objects of God's mercy through the cross of Christ, and that God can make something great out of any of us.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 2:12-13

What does it mean that "mercy triumphs over judgment"? How can that help us overcome our prejudices of others?

What do you think that the "law of freedom" is? How will remembering that law help us treat the poor more charitably?

If we do not show mercy to others, what will become of us? Can you think of anywhere else in the Bible where our mercy towards others affects God's judgment of us?

When the Lord Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He ended His instruction with these words, "If you forgive people their wrongdoing, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. But if you don't forgive people, your Father will not forgive your wrongdoing" (Matthew 6:14-15). Our Father expects us to be as charitable towards others as He has been towards us. If we aren't, then it is a sign that we do not yet understand God's grace and mercy.

God has set us free from judgment through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We were poor and miserable, and yet God the Father gave us all His riches through the Lord Jesus Christ. In return, our Father expects us to do the same for others. We ought to be generous towards others, hopeful for them, and believe that they are extremely valuable to us because they are valuable to God.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How could you purposefully help to overcome any prejudice you might have towards others?

Can you think of a place where you can volunteer and serve others—somewhere you have never been before?

When you see a homeless person, how do you feel? Do you feel empathy or love for him or her? How can you be a part of serving the homeless in your community?

PRAY

Offer a time for group members to pray aloud, and ask the Father to help us see any prejudices we may have that are harming our relationships with others. Ask the Father to help us understand that everything that we have, whether family or money or jobs, are ours only because He gave them to us. Pray that the Holy Spirit will remind us that without the salvation that is ours in Jesus, we would be poor indeed. Reflect on the fact that we are rich not because of worldly possessions, but because we have Christ Jesus as our Lord.

COMMENTARY

JAMES 2:1-13

2:1. This verse commends Jesus as our glorious Lord Jesus Christ and warns that partiality against the poor is inconsistent with faith in Jesus Christ. My brothers shows that James wrote to his readers as believers and urged them to show the reality of their profession. Who is this Jesus? First, Jesus is the object of our faith. We have made a trust or commitment to him. We are believers in Jesus. Second, Jesus is the Lord of Glory. The Greek literally reads, “our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Glory.” James gave the title of “Glory” to Jesus, using a term that represents the full presentation of God’s presence and majesty. Jesus is the glorious God. This is a remarkable confession to come from Jesus’ half brother.

The practice of favoritism involved giving benefits to people who had outward advantages such as money, power, or social prominence. The readers of James were courting the favor of these important people by showing preference for them over the poor. The Mosaic Law had forbidden giving respect to persons of prominence (Deut. 1:17). To these scheming readers James gave a sharp directive, “Stop it!”

2:2–4. These verses illustrate the discrimination. In a Christian assembly a rich man and a poor man appeared. Perhaps both were non-Christians. The meeting could have taken place in the home of a Christian. The rich man wore a gold ring and fine clothes. The poor man appeared in shabby clothes. The word describing the ring of the rich man indicated that he was “gold-fingered.” He may have worn gold rings on several fingers. Wealthy people often wore more than a single ring. Shops rented rings to those wanting to give the appearance of wealth. Fine, used to describe the rich man’s clothing, means “sparkling” or “glittering.” Acts 10:30 uses the same word to describe the “shining” garments an angel was wearing. We would say he was a “smart” dresser.

Shabby, used to describe the poor man’s clothing, pictured clothing which was dirty or filthy. The man may have come from work, his clothing stained with the evidence of his labor. The handsome apparel of the rich man earned special treatment for him (v. 3). The greeter gave him a place of special honor. The soiled clothing of the poor man earned indifference to his comfort or feelings. He received the options of standing in some undesirable place or sitting on the floor near the greeter. The greeter showed no concern for his needs.

Verse 4 uses a question to accuse the readers of a pair of evil actions. An affirmative answer is expected. They had indeed discriminated and become evil judges. First, they discriminated among themselves. They were guilty of creating divisions in their midst despite the fact that they had accepted the abolition of class distinctions (see Gal. 3:28). Second, they acted like evil-minded or prejudiced judges, regulating their conduct by blatantly false principles.

They practiced a favoritism toward the rich inconsistent with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for all people. If they continued to practice it, they could not claim to be followers of the Lord who abolished partiality. Deuteronomy 10:17 shows that God practices no partiality. Surely he could not tolerate such action among his own children. A wide difference separated the faith they professed from their partisan practices. We can apply this warning in our relationships with different races, social classes, or economic groups.

2:5–6a. Partiality is contrary to God’s plan and threatening to the best interests of believers. James contrasted God’s exaltation of the poor with their abuse by his readers. Their practice of discrimination against the poor was contrary to the way God had purposed to treat them. Verse 5 shows how God views the poor. Verse 6a presents the contrasting practices of

his readers. It is clear: Christians need to adopt God's outlook for the poor. God chose the poor. Paul used "chose" to describe the election of believers to salvation (Eph. 1:4). In James 2:5 "chose" describes spiritual blessings God has reserved for the poor. God chose the poor to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him.

The world may look on poverty-stricken people as insignificant and worthless. God sees them as abounding in the riches of faith. Their faith allows them to experience God's wealth—salvation and its accompanying blessings. This does not suggest all the poor are converted, nor does it mean God practices a bias against those who are not poor. The poor God blesses are those whose poverty is primarily to be "poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3). Often those who are economically poor are better placed than the wealthy to understand God's purposes. They are more likely than the rich to be prospects for conversion. The kingdom is the full manifestation of Christ's future kingdom at the end of the age. The poor may appear insignificant in this world, but they have the glorious hope of inheriting the kingdom with Jesus (see Matt. 25:34). God loves the poor more than their treatment by Christians indicates. Verse 6a outlines the church's treatment of the poor. They had insulted the poor by asking them to stand in some uncomfortable location or to sit on the floor as the Christians gathered for worship. Such shabby treatment could convince the poor that Christianity was not for them.

2:6b–7. The actions of the Christians did not help their own interests. They were pursuing a path of folly. Their treatment of the rich and the poor resembled honoring an executioner while insulting a valued friend. The rich faced three charges. First, they were exploiting the poor by social and economic mistreatment. James 5:4 accuses the wealthy of failing to pay past-due wages. It was a strange twist of circumstances to honor such abusive masters. Second, the rich hauled believers into court and practiced judicial persecution. Notice the actions of the wealthy slaveowners who dragged Paul and Silas into court in Acts 16:19–21. Third, they belittled the Lord Jesus by insulting his person and rejecting his claims. The Jews of Antioch showed this behavior in Acts 13:45. These whom the church welcomed were not Christians but wealthy, Christ-rejecting Jews. The readers of James belonged to Jesus, and their biased actions dishonored his honorable name.

2:8. James designated the command to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18) as the royal law. He may have used the term royal because Christ, the true king, set forth the law (Matt. 22:39). In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) Jesus defined a neighbor and discussed the demands of loving a neighbor. Jesus defined a neighbor as anyone in need. He urged us to show our love to neighbors by responding to their needs. Some of James's readers felt they had been obedient to God in the matter of showing love for the poor and needy. Wherever that was true, James gave credit. If they were really putting God's law into practice, this was noble and commendable. The command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves is an impossible standard without the power of the living Christ (John 13:34–35). Whenever Christians have applied this standard, it has remade communities, societies, and homes. Whoever follows this life of service will receive the Lord's commendation at the final judgment (Matt. 25:21).

2:9–11. This section deplors the violation of the royal law. If the readers truly practiced favoritism, they committed sin and stood convicted as lawbreakers. Leviticus 19:15 had warned against the practice of favoritism, against either the poor or the rich. It appealed for fair treatment of our neighbors. Lawbreakers describes persons who have stepped over a line or a limit. Lawbreakers had mockingly stepped over God's boundaries and performed a forbidden practice.

Verse 10 shows why those who practice partiality are lawbreakers. Some Jews saw God's law as containing many detached requirements forbidding such actions as murder, adultery, and robbery. They failed to see its unity. They may have felt that strict obedience at one point would compensate for disobedience elsewhere. God's Law is not like a setup of ten bowling pins which we knock down one at a time. It more resembles a pane of glass in which a break at one point means that the entire pane is broken. The primary application of verse 10 was to one who showed partiality for the rich over the poor. Violating this single commandment made a person a lawbreaker. We should apply the statement of verse 10 in other areas where we are tempted to praise ourselves for obedience at one point while neglecting to consider the points where we grievously disobey God's teachings.

2:12–13. These verses conclude the discussion of partiality by appealing for obedience to the royal law in both speech and action. Those who judge others often forget that they must face God's judgment. The reality of God's coming judgment is an incentive for Christians to speak and act obediently. The standard of judgment in that day will be the law that gives freedom. This is a reference to the gospel (see also James 1:25 and the discussion of the term under "Deeper Discoveries" in chapter 1). In John 8:32–36 Jesus had described the gospel as a truth which sets people free. James echoed these words in verse 12. Those who obey God by faith in Jesus Christ find freedom to serve God and escape from fear of future judgment. Faith in Jesus Christ provides freedom to escape hatred and self-love and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

James alluded to the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:7 to warn that those who show no mercy will receive none in the final judgment. Stated positively, this means mercy triumphs over judgment. This does not mean we receive mercy from God only when we show mercy to others. If that were true, it would make salvation a matter of God's payment for our good deeds. For those who have given themselves in faith to Christ, God's mercy triumphs over our guilt and judgment. If we have received God's grace, we will stand in the coming judgment. Mercy can rejoice in its victory over condemnation.