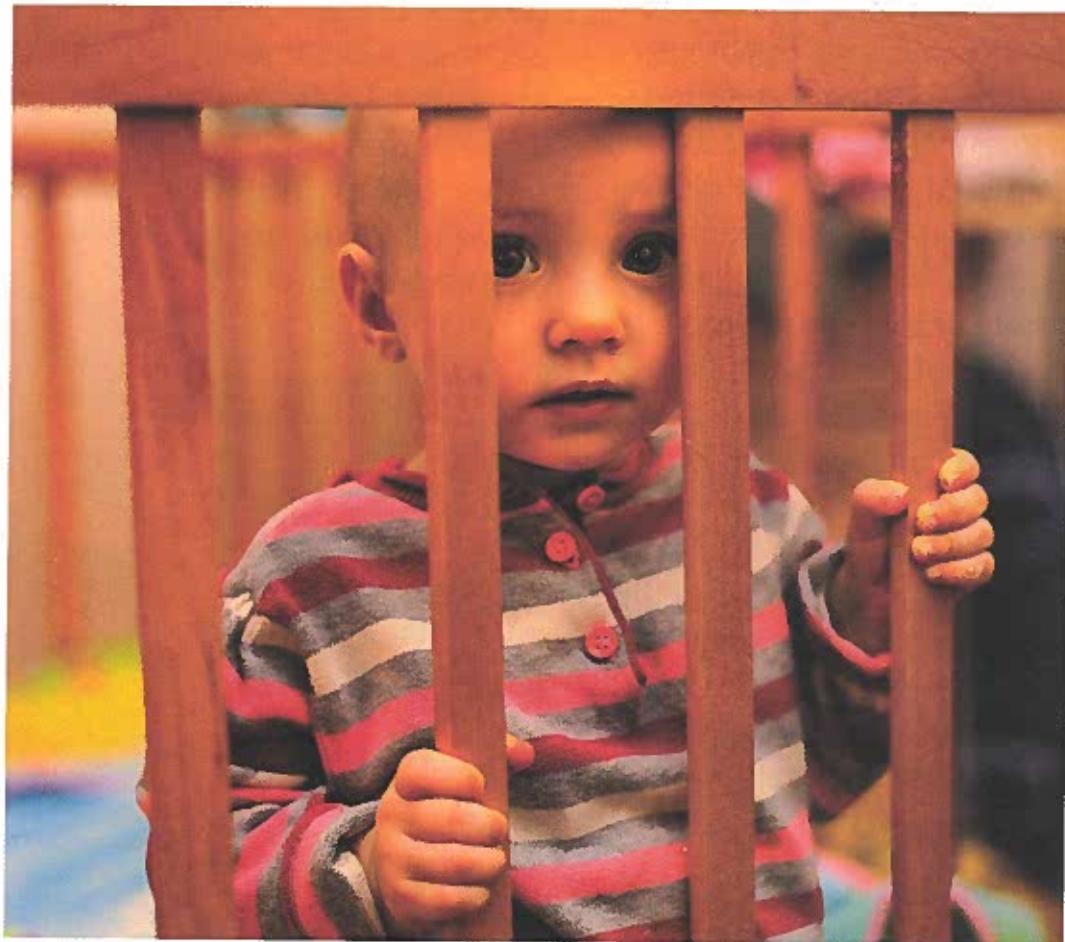


SESSION 2

Faith on Display in Your Relationships



QUESTION 1:

Who could get away with just about anything when you were growing up?

THE POINT

Don't play favorites.

THE PASSAGE

James 2:1-13

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

When Stephen A. Smith, a sports commentator, came under fire for his insensitive remarks about Shohei Ohtani, a designated hitter and pitcher with the Los Angeles Angels, he did not make excuses. Instead, Smith said, "I was wrong, period."

Smith's comments had nothing to do with Ohtani's performance in baseball; his remarks were tied to the fact that Ohtani is Japanese. As a black man, Smith has been on the other side of racism and is an outspoken critic of racist thought and behavior. However, this time, he was the offending party. Smith said that his words were "inexcusable," and acknowledged that he "contributed to the ongoing hate against the Asian and Asian American community."¹

Smith is not alone. Racism and prejudice are far more common than they should be among those who agree that "all are created equal." Whether the distinctions we make are racial, socio-economic, religious, or political, we often treat people differently because they are different than us or cannot do something for us. James pointed to a better way. He taught that we should treat everyone the same.

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?

On occasion I do a church consultation to help and assist a church. I will ask friends to visit the church and let me know their perceptions. A few years ago, two people had extremely different experiences at the same church, on the same day. One was warmly welcomed, given some materials, and introduced to the senior pastor. The other sat alone without any interaction from anyone. Now it could just be a coincidence, but the guest who was given the warm welcome happens to be of the same race as most of the attenders of that church. The other individual is not. The church appeared to play favorites based on outward appearances, a clear violation of the principle in this passage.

If "faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" has permeated our lives, then we will not play favorites based on outward appearances or any other reason. Racism and all other kinds of discrimination are sins. We should cling to our faith when we are tempted to discriminate. The goal is not shifting our discrimination from one group to another, but stopping it all together. Living without playing favorites requires us to maintain our faith as we continue looking to and relying on God.

In support of this command, James gave an example that his initial readers could easily relate to—and it's an example that translates into our own church culture. In James's case, believers were gathering for a meeting. James did not say whether this was a routine, regular meeting of the believers or if it had a specific purpose. The occasion was not the point of the story; rather, James wanted to highlight the reaction of the regular attenders.

Two guests joined the regular attenders for the meeting. Both apparently were new to the meeting because they needed help knowing where they should sit. Their newness was not the only thing that made them stand out. Neither of them conformed to the normal socio-economic standing of everyone else. One was outlandishly rich; the other was desperately poor.

The rich man's wealth was obvious. The "gold ring" on his finger could have been a sign of great authority, like a signet ring that officials used to seal important documents, or it symbolized social standing like the ring the father put on the finger of his prodigal son when he returned home (Luke 15:22). He was also "dressed in fine clothes," implying his robes were ostentatious and brilliant.

By contrast, the poor man was desperately needy. Certainly, nothing was ostentatious about what he wore, but his clothes garnered as much attention, perhaps even more. Likely, he did not even own a change of clothes or a means to wash the one garment he owned. Since his clothing was soiled, we can assume he probably had not bathed in a while either.

The distinctions between these two men may have been obvious, but it is not our place to shine a light on those distinctions. When we do so, James asked rhetorically, do we not "become judges with evil thoughts?" As we hold on to our faith in Christ, we trust Him, obey Him, and live like Him. God does not show partiality (Deut. 10:17), and neither should we.

QUESTION 2:

What are some ways people show favoritism today?

ENGAGE

Who do you personally identify with in this story?

The rich person—wearing fine clothes.

The poor person—wearing filthy clothes.

How have you been guilty of making distinctions between people?

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?

When we discriminate between people, we are making judgment calls we have no place or authority to make. By discounting some in favor of others, we are also discounting God, His view of them, and how He is able to work through them. That's what the people were doing in James's example. By escorting the wealthy man to preferred seating and not giving the same honored status to the poor man, the people were dismissing the value and usefulness of the poor man.

The decision to honor one and demean the other based on outward appearances is not just done with individuals. Unfortunately, some practice such bigotry with whole classes of people. By favoring the audaciously wealthy person over the desperately poor man, the members discounted the poor as a valued

class of people. Economics or social standing are immaterial to God; God wants to use us all for His kingdom purposes, and He will supply us with whatever gifts we need to do so.

One way God uses the poor in the world is to be examples of what it means “to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him.” Jesus pointed out one such example to His disciples in Luke 21:1-4. As Jesus watched people bring their gifts in the temple, he paid special attention to a woman who gave two small coins. He commented that her gift was greater than the huge sums that the wealthy contributed to the treasury: “For all these people have put in gifts out of their surplus, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on” (v. 4). Her gift left her with nothing but her faith and trust in God—and in that she was rich.

Because they have little, the faith of the poor is often quite visible. Their faith is on full display when they do the right thing instead of taking advantage of a situation. That is what brought Billy Ray Harris to the notice of others several years ago. Harris was homeless and panhandling at his regular spot on a sidewalk in Kansas City, Missouri, when Sarah Darling dumped some change from her wallet into his cup. What she did not realize until later was that when she gave the money, her engagement ring slipped from her finger. Harris did not notice it either until he counted the money at the end of the day.

When Harris found the ring, he had a jeweler look at it, who offered him \$4,000 for the ring. Some might have taken the money, but Harris decided not to. His grandfather, a preacher, raised him to be honest. He knew in his heart he had to return the ring. When Darling realized the ring was gone, she went to Harris’s usual spot and was pleased with his response. He was waiting for her so that he could give it back.²

It is impossible to know what is in people’s hearts merely by glancing at their outward appearances. When we marginalize the poor just because they are ragged or dirty, we may be ignoring the

strength of their character or the richness of their faith. Conversely, when we honor someone because they are smartly dressed or bejeweled, we may be elevating people of poor character to a place of honor, people who take advantage of others and are undeserving of special recognition. In James's example, the believers had honored those who oppressed them, and dragged them into court. They may have been rich in the temporary things of wealth, but what really matters is faith in God and love for others.

QUESTION 3:

What are some ways we overlook the poor in the church today?

James 2:8-13

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.

11 For he who said, Do not commit adultery, also said, Do not murder. So if you do not commit adultery, but you murder, you are a lawbreaker.

12 Speak and act as those who are to be judged by the law of freedom.

13 For judgment is without mercy to the one who has not shown mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

James was not discouraging the believers from treating the rich well, but he did not want the rich treated differently. We are to treat everyone equally well—the rich and the poor—and that means we love them all.

When “an expert in the law” asked Jesus to name “the greatest” commandment, Jesus mentioned two: “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. 22:35-40).

In the Old Testament law, the Jews were mandated to love their neighbor rather than hold a grudge or seek revenge against someone in the community (Lev. 19:18). Unfortunately, the Jews had restricted the definition of *neighbor* to only include their fellow Jews, but Jesus applied the law of love to those outside the community as well. A neighbor is not just somebody who is like us or who lives near us. Jesus expanded the definition of neighbor to include those outside our group, even those against whom we might be tempted to hold a prejudice. He made this clear in a powerful story, the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). In this parable, Jesus made the hero a Samaritan, someone against whom the Jews showed extreme prejudice.

We typically refer to the twofold command to love God and love others as we love ourselves as the Great Commandment. James called the command to love our neighbor as ourselves “the royal law.” “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and He is our king; therefore, His royal law is centered on love. Love is to reign supreme. The royal law of love applies to all God’s people, all the time. If it is not universally applied, then it is not being kept at all.

QUESTION 4:

How can we go beyond passively avoiding favoritism to actively demonstrating God’s love?

We are to fulfill the royal law completely and consistently. When we show favoritism toward one person, resulting in the denigration of another, we become sinful—we are lawbreakers. Someone might try to rationalize their actions: “OK, I may have a wrong attitude

toward some, but it's not like I committed adultery or killed someone." Sin, regardless of the type of sin, is still sin. When we fail to keep the royal law, that makes us lawbreakers. Neither the adulterer nor the murderer can claim to keep the law just because the one who murdered did not commit adultery and the adulterer did not commit murder. What they *did not do* does not negate what they *did do!* Both are lawbreakers. They have broken different laws, but they both are guilty of breaking the law. And those who show prejudice and favoritism are right there beside them!

The purpose of James's argument was not to heap condemnation on us, but to call us to repentance: to cause us to take the sin of favoritism seriously, turn from it, and begin to demonstrate love to everyone. In James's illustration, that means we treat all who come into our meetings in the same way. Treating the rich and poor alike means we show kindness, compassion, and mercy to all, just as Christ shows it to us (Eph. 4:32). Jesus taught that those who are merciful "will be shown mercy" (Matt. 5:7), and those who have received mercy must give it to others (18:21-35). Mercy wins.

We will be held to the standard of "the law of freedom." Some view this law as the royal law of love mentioned earlier. Others see it as a reference to the gospel. Others define it as the law given in the Old Testament. Christ kept that law for us, and it is through faith in Him that we are set free. His love set us free—and we were made free to love others. We will be judged by how we lived out that law of freedom, so all our words and actions need to fall in line with it through how we treat others. We should treat one another with kindness, love, and mercy. We are to treat everyone with honor. We are not to banish anyone to a place of dishonor.

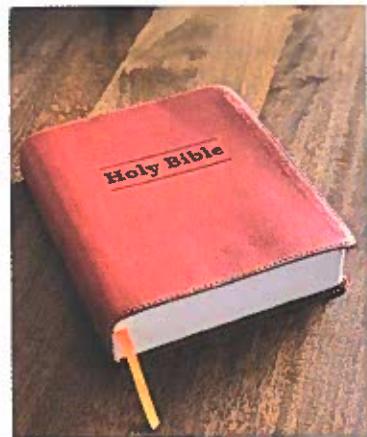
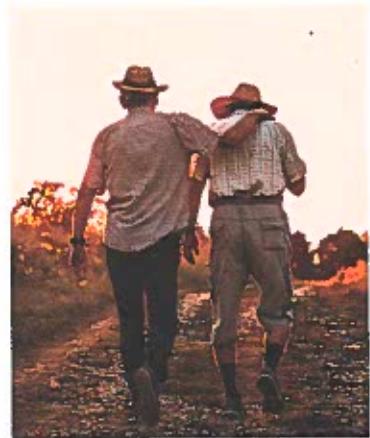
QUESTION 5:

What practical steps can a church take to ensure that all members have equal opportunities to serve?

LIVE IT OUT

How will you live out the truth from this passage?

- ▶ **Make contact.** In your group and congregational setting, greet those you don't know. Smile. Make eye contact. Ask their names. Practice the five-minute rule. Five minutes before and after a church gathering, seek out people you do not know very well and spend a few minutes chatting with them.
- ▶ **Invite someone.** You likely have friends and acquaintances who outwardly may not "fit in" with your group or church. Don't assume they won't fit in. Invite them to come with you. Show them the love of Christ.
- ▶ **Help end poverty for someone.** Find a way to help someone in need. While you cannot end all poverty, you can help someone in need. Remember the story about Sarah Darling and Billy Ray Harris? She shared his kindness on social media and raised \$190,000 for him. He used the money to get a car, secure a place to live, and start a house painting business.



END NOTES

1. Jenna Lemoncelli, "Jeff Passan rips Stephen A. Smith over Shohei Ohtani comments in fiery 'First Take,'" *New York Post*, July 13, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/07/13/stephen-a-smiths-apology-on-first-take-after-shohei-ohtani-comments/>.

2. Alia E. Dastagir, "Homeless man who returned ring reunites with family," *USA Today*, March 24, 2013, www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/03/24/homeless-man-engagement-ring-family-reunion/2015777.