

The Book of James, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: The Sin of Favoritism

James 2:1–13

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The doctrinal core of this lesson is the incompatibility of favoritism with the gospel of a Lord who shows no partiality. James grounds the prohibition of partiality in the person of Christ, the Lord of glory, and in God's gracious choice of the lowly. This connects to the heart of the New Testament: in Christ the old worldly distinctions are dismantled, and the church is to be a community where neither wealth nor status determines worth. Help students see that partiality is not a minor social flaw but a denial of the gospel that contradicts the character of God who accepts all who come to Him.

There is also significant teaching here on law, sin, and judgment. James calls love of neighbor the royal law, teaches that one breach makes us lawbreakers, and warns that we will be judged under the law of liberty. This is an opportunity to teach the seriousness of sin and the unity of God's law without slipping into legalism, since James immediately exalts mercy: mercy triumphs over judgment. Keep the balance the text keeps. Sin is serious and judgment is real, yet the merciful will receive mercy, and the gospel frees us to love without fear or flattery. Take care not to teach a salvation by mere law-keeping; the law convicts, and mercy in Christ saves and then reshapes how we treat others.

Formationally, this lesson reaches a sin almost everyone commits and almost no one notices. Your aim is to help students see their own partiality honestly, to expose the standards by which they secretly rank people, and to call them to concrete love of an overlooked neighbor. The tone should be searching but hopeful: the same mercy that triumphs over our judgment frees us to extend that mercy to others. Teach the truth clearly, and let it reshape how students see every image-bearer who walks through the door.

Question 1

Student Question:

James writes, "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory" (v. 1). Why does James treat favoritism as fundamentally incompatible with genuine faith in Jesus, and what does it say about Christ that partiality dishonors Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the striking way James frames the command. He sets favoritism directly against holding "the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." The title "Lord of glory" is deliberate. The most glorious person in the universe entered the world in poverty, born in a

borrowed stable, with no place to lay His head. For people who follow such a Lord to fawn over earthly glory and despise the lowly is a contradiction at the root.

Help students see that partiality is not merely impolite; it is incompatible with the gospel. The God we worship chose us not because we were impressive but because of His grace. To then rank others by their impressiveness is to forget the very mercy that saved us. Our treatment of people should mirror the God who showed us undeserved favor.

Press the point that this dishonors Christ himself. When the church plays favorites, it misrepresents its Lord, who receives all who come to Him and shows no partiality (Acts 10:34–35). The watching world learns about Jesus partly from how His people treat the unimpressive.

This is a doctrinal claim worth stating plainly: genuine faith in the impartial Lord produces impartial love. A faith that comfortably ranks people by status is not yet the living faith James describes; it has not let the character of Christ reach its attitudes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Favoritism as incompatible with genuine faith in Christ, the Lord of glory.
- God's impartiality as the pattern for the church (Acts 10:34–35; Romans 2:11).
- The humility of Christ's incarnation as a rebuke to the worship of earthly glory.
- The church's treatment of people as a witness to the character of its Lord.
- Living faith producing impartial love, not mere agreement.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does following the Lord of glory rule out favoritism?
- How does our treatment of people reflect or distort the gospel to outsiders?
- How does remembering God's grace toward us reshape how we treat others?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think about the people you find easy to welcome and those you find easy to ignore. Where do you see partiality at work in your own attitudes, even in subtle ways you would not normally call sin?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the searchlight inward before students can comfortably condemn the ancient assembly. We all find some people easy to welcome and others easy to ignore. Help students name their own patterns honestly rather than assuming favoritism is someone else's sin.

Encourage them to notice the subtle forms. Favoritism today rarely announces itself. It hides in who we greet warmly and who we walk past, whose calls we return quickly, whom we seat at the table, whom we assume is worth our time. The sin is in the quiet sorting.

Help them identify their personal currency of worth. For some it is success or wealth; for others it is education, attractiveness, usefulness, or social ease. We tend to honor those who have what we value and overlook those who do not.

Keep the tone non-condemning but serious. The goal is awareness that leads to repentance and changed behavior, not paralysis by guilt. Naming the pattern is the first step toward loving differently.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The subtlety of partiality in everyday attitudes and actions.
- Self-examination as the path to repentance from hidden sin.
- The currencies of worth by which we secretly rank people.
- The universality of this sin among believers.

Discussion Prompts

- Whom do you find easy to welcome, and whom easy to ignore?
- What is your personal currency of worth when sizing people up?
- Where does partiality hide in your ordinary week?

Question 3

Student Question:

In the example of the man with the gold ring and the poor man in shabby clothing (vv. 2–4), James says those who show partiality have “become judges with evil thoughts.” What does it mean that favoritism turns us into corrupt judges, and what standard are we using when we do it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

James's illustration in verses 2 through 4 is concrete and uncomfortable. The man with the gold ring gets the good seat; the poor man is told to stand or sit on the floor. James's verdict is sharp: such people have “made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts.”

Focus on the word “judges.” Favoritism is not passive; it is an act of judgment. When we honor one and dismiss another based on appearance, we are rendering a verdict on their worth. James calls this judging “with evil thoughts” because the standard is corrupt, it measures people by externals rather than by their standing before God.

Connect this to the law of liberty from chapter one. We who have looked into the perfect mirror of God's word should know better than to judge by appearances, for God himself does not judge that way: "the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). When we judge by the surface, we set our judgment against God's.

Apply it to the snap judgments we all make. In the first seconds of meeting someone, we assign them a value based on dress, accent, age, status, or usefulness. James exposes this reflex as a courtroom of corrupt verdicts and calls us to a different way of seeing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Favoritism as an act of corrupt judgment, not mere preference.
- Judging by externals versus God who looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).
- The evil standard behind partiality: worldly value rather than God's.
- The call to see people as God sees them.

Discussion Prompts

- In what sense does favoritism make us judges with a corrupt standard?
- How do your snap judgments of people reveal what you value?
- How does God's way of seeing differ from ours?

Question 4

Student Question:

When you size someone up quickly by their appearance, status, usefulness, or success, what does that snap judgment reveal about what you actually value? How would Jesus have you see that person instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the issue of snap judgments into the personal realm. Ask students to recall a recent moment when they sized someone up instantly. What was the basis, appearance, accent, success, usefulness, and what verdict did they reach?

Help them see that these reflexes reveal the heart's true scale of values. We can profess that all people are equal before God and still betray, in our instant reactions, that we actually rank them by status. The reflex is more honest than the profession.

Move toward seeing as Jesus sees. He saw a tax collector and called him to follow; He saw a Samaritan woman and offered living water; He saw children the disciples shooed away and welcomed them. Invite students to imagine how Jesus would have seen the person they dismissed.

Make it practical. Suggest a discipline of pausing when they notice a snap judgment, silently affirming the person's worth as God's image-bearer, and asking how love would act. Small habits of re-seeing can retrain the heart over time.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Snap judgments as windows into the heart's real values.
- Every person as an image-bearer of God with inherent worth (Genesis 1:27).
- Jesus's pattern of seeing and welcoming the overlooked.
- Practical retraining of perception toward love.

Discussion Prompts

- What was the basis of a recent snap judgment you made?
- How would Jesus have seen the person you dismissed?
- What habit could help you re-see people as God sees them?

Question 5

Student Question:

James asks, "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?" (v. 5), and notes that it is often the rich who oppress believers (vv. 6–7). What does this teach about how God's values differ from the world's, and about who is truly honored in the kingdom?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In verse 5 James turns the world's value system upside down: "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?" The poor whom the assembly dishonored are often the very ones God has chosen and enriched in faith. To despise them is to despise God's chosen.

Be careful to teach this rightly. James is not saying poverty is itself virtuous or that God loves the poor and not the rich. He is exposing the church's backward instinct: it honored the rich, whom God had not necessarily honored, and dishonored the poor, whom God had often raised to be heirs. God's choices frequently confound the world's rankings.

Note the irony James points out in verses 6 and 7: it was often the rich who oppressed the believers, dragged them into court, and blasphemed the name of Christ. The assembly was flattering the very people who afflicted them, while shaming those who shared their faith. Favoritism is not only sinful; it is foolish.

Draw out the kingdom principle. God's kingdom runs on a different economy. The poor are heirs, the meek inherit the earth, the last are first. This is the same reversal James taught in

chapter one about the lowly and the rich. Help students adopt God's scale of value, where being an heir of the kingdom outweighs every earthly distinction.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's gracious choice often falling on the lowly, confounding worldly rankings (1 Corinthians 1:26–29).
- The kingdom economy that reverses worldly value (Luke 6:20; Matthew 5:3).
- Riches in faith and inheritance in the kingdom as true wealth.
- The folly of flattering the powerful who oppose Christ.
- Neither poverty nor wealth as virtue in itself; the issue is the heart and God's grace.

Discussion Prompts

- How do God's values differ from the world's rankings of people?
- Why is favoritism toward the powerful not only sinful but foolish?
- What does it mean to count being an heir of the kingdom as true wealth?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where have you been tempted to measure your own worth, or someone else's, by wealth, status, or influence rather than by being an heir of God's kingdom? How does God's choice of the poor confront that?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns God's choice of the poor back on the student's own self-evaluation. We do not only rank others; we rank ourselves, often by the same worldly measures of wealth, status, and influence. Help students examine where their own sense of worth is anchored.

Many believers quietly feel more or less valuable depending on their income, title, achievements, or social standing. James's teaching that the poor are heirs of the kingdom confronts this directly. Our worth rests on being chosen by God and made His heir, not on any earthly metric.

Help students see the freedom in this. If our worth is secure as heirs of the kingdom, we no longer need to climb over others or flatter the powerful to feel valuable. The gospel frees us from the exhausting economy of comparison.

Apply it to how they treat others as well. When our own worth is secure in Christ, we can honor the overlooked without feeling diminished, because we are not competing for a scarce supply of significance. Settled identity produces generous love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christian worth grounded in being chosen and made an heir, not in earthly status.
- Freedom from comparison and status-seeking through identity in Christ.
- Secure identity as the foundation for honoring others.
- The gospel as liberation from the economy of human approval.

Discussion Prompts

- By what measures are you tempted to rank your own worth?
- How does being an heir of God's kingdom confront those measures?
- How does a secure identity in Christ free you to honor the overlooked?

Question 7

Student Question:

James calls love of neighbor “the royal law” and says that to show partiality is to commit sin and be “convicted by the law as transgressors,” adding that whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point is guilty of all (vv. 8–11). Why does James connect favoritism so directly to the command to love your neighbor, and what does it teach that breaking the law at one point makes us lawbreakers?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In verses 8 through 11 James grounds his rebuke of favoritism in “the royal law,” love your neighbor as yourself. Favoritism is not a vague impropriety; it is a direct violation of the central command of neighbor-love. To play favorites is to love some neighbors and dismiss others, which is to break the royal law.

Then James makes a weighty point about the unity of God's law: “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” He illustrates with adultery and murder. The law is not a buffet from which we select the commands we like; it is the single will of one Lawgiver. To break it at any point is to set ourselves against the God who gave all of it.

Teach this carefully to avoid two errors. First, James is not saying every sin is equal in its earthly consequences; he is saying that any sin makes us transgressors who stand in need of mercy. Second, he is not promoting salvation by flawless law-keeping; he is exposing our universal guilt so that we will flee to mercy, which he exalts in the next verse.

Apply it to favoritism specifically. Students may have considered partiality a minor matter while priding themselves on avoiding the big sins. James dismantles that self-justification: to break the royal law of love through favoritism is to stand as a transgressor, just as surely as in the sins we consider serious.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love of neighbor as the royal law, the summary of our duty to others (Matthew 22:39).

- Favoritism as a direct breach of neighbor-love, not a minor matter.
- The unity of God's law: one Lawgiver, so one breach makes us transgressors.
- The law's purpose to expose universal guilt and drive us to mercy.
- The seriousness of sin without teaching salvation by flawless law-keeping.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does James connect favoritism so directly to loving your neighbor?
- What does it mean that breaking the law at one point makes us transgressors?
- How does this dismantle the idea that favoritism is a minor sin?

Question 8

Student Question:

Is there a particular person or group you have effectively excluded from “neighbor” in your heart? What would it look like to love that specific neighbor as yourself this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question makes the royal law personal and specific. Most of us have, in practice, edited the definition of neighbor, quietly excluding certain people or groups from the circle of those we are obligated to love.

Invite honest reflection on who that is for each student. It may be a difficult family member, a political opponent, a person of another background, someone who has hurt them, or simply a category of people they have learned to dismiss. The exclusion is often unspoken but real.

Recall Jesus's answer to the lawyer who asked, “Who is my neighbor?” He told of a Samaritan, a despised outsider, who proved neighbor to a wounded man. Jesus refused to let neighbor be narrowed; he widened it to include the very person we would exclude.

Press toward concrete love. Ask each student to name one specific person they have excluded and one specific act of neighbor-love they could extend this week. The royal law is kept not in sentiment but in action.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The universal scope of neighbor-love (Luke 10:25–37).
- The temptation to narrow the definition of neighbor to exclude certain people.
- Love of neighbor expressed in concrete action, not feeling.
- Christ's example of widening rather than narrowing love.

Discussion Prompts

- Whom have you effectively excluded from the category of neighbor?

- What would loving that specific person as yourself look like this week?
- How does the parable of the Good Samaritan confront your exclusions?

Question 9

Student Question:

James concludes, "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (vv. 12–13). What does this teach about how we will be judged, the relationship between the mercy we show and the mercy we receive, and how the gospel of mercy frees us from the favoritism that fears and flatters?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the climactic and most weighty block of the lesson, so give it room. James concludes, "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment." He brings the whole argument to bear on the reality of coming judgment.

Teach first that we will indeed be judged. James does not flinch from this; he says our speech and actions, including our treatment of the lowly, will be assessed under the law of liberty. This is consistent with the New Testament's clear teaching that all will give account to God (2 Corinthians 5:10; Matthew 25:31–46). Judgment is real, and how we have treated people matters in it.

Then teach the stunning principle: "judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy." There is a real connection between the mercy we extend and the mercy we receive, exactly as Jesus taught: blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy (Matthew 5:7); forgive, and you will be forgiven. This is not salvation earned by our mercy, but evidence that those who have truly received God's mercy become merciful. A persistently merciless heart shows it has not grasped the mercy of the gospel.

Finally, exalt the triumphant note on which James ends: "Mercy triumphs over judgment." For those who have received and now extend God's mercy, mercy has the last word. This is the gospel that frees us from favoritism: we no longer need to fear the powerful or flatter the wealthy, because our standing rests on the mercy of God in Christ. Help students feel both the seriousness of judgment and the joy of mercy. The merciful are free to love everyone, because they have been loved by the God of all mercy. Tie this back to the whole passage: the cure for favoritism is not gritted effort but a heart so gripped by mercy that it cannot help extending it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The reality of coming judgment for all, including how we treat people (2 Corinthians 5:10; Matthew 25:31–46).

- The connection between showing mercy and receiving mercy (Matthew 5:7; 6:14–15).
- Mercy as the evidence, not the purchase price, of having received God's grace.
- Salvation preserved through a faith that bears the fruit of mercy, against mere profession.
- Mercy triumphing over judgment as the gospel's freeing word for the merciful.
- Freedom from fearing the powerful or flattering the rich because our standing rests on God's mercy.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that we will be judged under the law of liberty?
- How are the mercy we show and the mercy we receive connected?
- How does “mercy triumphs over judgment” free you from favoritism's fear and flattery?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage. James exposes a sin we commit almost without noticing and calls us to the mercy that triumphs over judgment. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to lay down partiality and love a particular neighbor this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone calls for one concrete act of laying down partiality and loving a particular neighbor. The passage has named the sin, exposed its roots, and exalted the mercy that frees us; now it asks for a step.

Help students choose someone specific, ideally the very person or group they identified earlier as excluded or overlooked. Vague resolutions to be less judgmental change nothing; a specific act of mercy toward a named person changes us.

Encourage them to frame it as flowing from mercy received. We extend mercy because we have been shown mercy. The motive is not guilt but gratitude, the overflow of a heart that has grasped how freely God welcomed us.

Close by lifting their eyes to Christ, the Lord of glory who showed us the ultimate partiality of grace, choosing the unworthy. As they have been welcomed, they can welcome. As mercy triumphed for them, let it triumph through them this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Concrete mercy as the fruit of mercy received.
- Gratitude rather than guilt as the motive for loving the overlooked.
- Christ's gracious welcome as the pattern and power for welcoming others.
- Sanctification as Christ reshaping how we see and treat every person.

Discussion Prompts

- Whom specifically will you love this week, and how?
- How does mercy received fuel the mercy you extend?
- In one sentence, how is Jesus calling you to lay down partiality?