

Week 6: James: Favoritism

Hook



Main Point: True followers of Jesus don't show partiality but love all people.

The 2025 Oscar® Nominee gift bag included gifts worth nearly \$220,000. Here are some highlights:

- \$240 cutting board from John Boos
- \$1,570 luxury pocket squares from Daniel Ashley Co.
- \$3,500 virtual wellness retreat by 3D Wellness® Retreats
- \$5,200 stay at Barcelona's five-star Cotton House Hotel
- \$25,000 AncestryDNA® VIP Family History Experience

These gift bags were given to 26 people; the lucky recipients were the nominees in the four acting categories, the directing nominees and the host.¹ With more than 200 nominations in total, most nominees went without these perks.²

Q: Why do you think a Best Actor nominee would receive a gift bag while a nominee in the visual effects category would not?

Q: Are there some institutions in which favoritism is most prevalent?

Q: Why is showing favoritism tempting? In what ways is favoritism counter to the Gospel message?

RECAP: So far in our study of James, we have touched on each of the main ideas of his message, which he returns to in more detail throughout the letter:

- Wisdom – what true wisdom is and how we find it. Wisdom is the basis for everything else covered in James, which is known as the “wisdom literature of the New Testament.”
- Trials and temptations – how God uses all things in the life of a believer for our good
- Faith and works – being doers of the Word, not just hearers
- True religion – keeping a tight rein on our tongues, caring for the vulnerable, keeping ourselves unstained by the world

In chapter 2, James’s letter starts to explore some of these topics more deeply. In James 1:9–11, James said God humbles the rich and exalts the lowly, because everyone has equal value in God’s eyes, regardless of how the world values them. In this section, James will discuss how that should look in the Church, which is meant to be a picture of God’s final kingdom here on earth. Among God’s people, who live by His ways.

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Book

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James 2:1–4 and Galatians 3:26–29 [Read]

Talking Point 1: The Church shows no partiality because God shows no partiality.

Q: Why might a church in James's time period show favoritism to the rich?

Q: What are the distinctions made in Galatians 3:28; what do they all have in common?

Q: How ought the Church see and treat the poor?

We saw in lesson 3 that in the Greco-Roman world, there was a huge distinction in social status between poor and rich. There were sharp divides between people of different social status – they could not eat together, do business together, marry each other, etc. But in God's kingdom, there is no difference in value between poor and rich. In the first church in Jerusalem, we saw this reflected in a shockingly countercultural way. Not only did the rich and poor share meals, pray together, and worship together, they shared everything they owned in common. The wealthy sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had a need (Acts 2:42–45). Which meant the rich literally, tangibly, financially humbled themselves to become not only equal in value to God, but equal in economic value and social standing. In a world where wealth was not just about money but about status, social standing, and value, this was an absolutely revolutionary idea – not only that the wealthy would share everything they had with the poor but that they would give their status away like that. It is important to understand that this image in Acts is descriptive and not necessarily prescriptive for the Church today. At the same time, the core of generosity we see in this text is absolutely an expectation God has for Christians for all time.

The way James wrote to the churches in this passage, it seems that some, if not all, of the churches had strayed away from this type of community to the point of behaving just like the world in the way they honored the rich and shamed the poor. This was one reason he wrote to the churches. James was the primary leader of that first church in Jerusalem, the community where, at first, everyone was treated equally and shared everything in common. But the Jerusalem church had already experienced their own struggles with that equality and community breaking down. In Acts 2–4, it was an ideal picture of the kingdom of God, but very quickly, in Acts 5–6, sin began to creep in.

The first story of brokenness in that ideal picture was of a couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who sold their land and said they were sharing it all with the community but instead held some back for themselves. The sin for which they were punished was lying about it. They wanted to be seen as people who gave up their wealth for others without actually doing it (Acts 5). The second story of brokenness was when the Hebraic Jews started making distinctions between themselves and the Hellenistic Jews. The church leadership immediately nipped that in the bud (Acts 6). These two stories show us just how easily even human beings who know Jesus are prone to make distinctions between “us” and “them” and hoard wealth, power and status for themselves. But there is no place in the kingdom of God for distinctions, partiality or power struggles.

James knew from experience how easily churches could start showing partiality to the rich, just as the world does, so he wrote to the churches of the Diaspora about it. He described exactly how those in the Greco-Roman world would treat the rich and the poor if they came into their assembly; they would give the rich man a place of honor and make the poor man sit at their feet or stand off to the side (places of dishonor). But this is not the way the kingdom of God should operate. There is no partiality in the kingdom of God.

James emphasized this point by using an intentional title for Christ, “the Lord of glory.” Christ is the Lord of glory; He has the greatest status of all. Glory and honor come from Him, not from the categories the world puts on us such as rich or poor, male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile (Galatians 3:28). All those who are adopted as children of God through faith in Christ receive His name, which comes with His honor and His glory (Galatians 3:26–4:8). We have glory solely because of our relationship to “the Lord of glory,” not because of anything about us at all. This is why there is no partiality in the kingdom of God.

If the Church is God’s people living by His ways, there should be no partiality among us, whether by honoring the rich over the poor or by making any other distinction. In our culture, it may be honoring those with a certain type of career such as doctors or lawyers while looking down on other vocations. It could be reflected in the way we treat people of different backgrounds or cultures or those for whom English is a second language. How will we treat them? The way Jesus would or the way the world does?

**Q: How have you seen people honoring certain types of people and shaming others?
How have you seen the Church doing the same?**

Q: How would our churches be different if we valued every person equally?

James 2:5–7 and Luke 12:13–21 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Our goal in life is to be rich in faith, not rich in worldly possessions.

Q: Describe what it means to be “rich in faith.” How can we pursue those types of riches?

Q: What does it mean to store up treasures in heaven? How can we do that?

Q: What counsel does Luke 12:15 give regarding covetousness?

When we read this passage, we need to remember we are reading wisdom literature. In the same way the Proverbs are general principles, not guarantees, so this passage is a generalization. “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” is not a guarantee that this will always happen in every situation. Sometimes, no matter how great a job you do as a parent, your kids stray because of other factors, such as falling in with the wrong friends or getting involved in drugs or something. But in general, the principle holds true.

In the same way, this passage is a generalization. It was true that many of the rich in their culture oppressed others, but this wasn’t true of *all* wealthy people. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, all the power was held by a small class of wealthy people while the masses lived in poverty. Life for the poor was harsh and difficult. They lived in small, poorly built apartments with few windows and worked for the rich in their homes, on their farms, or in their businesses. Poor children did not have access to education and had to work as well. The poor were considered worthless, less than human, so the unscrupulous rich used them for their own gain (Proverbs 22:16). On top of treating them badly in general, they often paid them less than they deserved or even withheld their wages (James 5:4).

Though our society is different today and the poor have more opportunities and resources, such as public education and subsidized housing, healthcare and supplemental nutrition assistance, it is still true that some of the rich who have no scruples oppress the poor to build their own wealth. Some companies outsource labor to countries that have no laws against child or slave labor or severely underpay their workers, so the company makes greater profits off the abuse of the poor. Even in the United States, there are abuses. The unscrupulous rich have always abused the poor to gain wealth.

It is also a generalization to say that those who are poor in this world are rich in faith. That often happens, but not always. Sometimes the poor are just as obsessed with money as the rich, just in the opposite way – with their lack of it and trying to get it. But

it is true that material riches can be a stumbling block to faith. Jesus had reasons for saying it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. It can be more difficult for the rich to put their trust in Jesus because they think they already have everything they need; they don't see a need for Jesus. Even if they say they trust in Jesus, their lives may show that they really put their trust in their wealth.

Regardless of whether you consider yourself rich or poor materially, the goal for a Jesus follower is to be "rich in faith," to store up treasures in heaven, not just on earth. This means investing our lives in the things that will last into heaven – bringing other people to Christ and growing in our own spiritual maturity. Regardless of how much money we have, this should be our life's focus. It also means if you are wealthy, you must be careful that you aren't gaining your wealth at the expense of other people but only in pure and honorable ways and that you use your wealth for good, to help others and build up the kingdom of God. This passage doesn't teach us that the rich are *all* bad and the poor are *all* good but that we should all strive to be rich in faith and live with the eternal perspective of storing up treasures in heaven.

Q: How can we use whatever wealth we have to help others and build the kingdom?

Q: How would your life be different if you focused more on growing your "richness" in faith rather than growing financial wealth?

James 2:8–9 and Matthew 22:34–40 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Part of loving your neighbor as yourself is not showing partiality.

Q: In what ways is loving your neighbor connected to loving God?

Q: Why is showing partiality to the wealthy not loving your neighbor?

If you've been in church for any length of time, you've probably heard that Jesus taught that the two greatest commandments are loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. And that these two commandments are interconnected. You cannot love your neighbor well if you don't know and love God, because God is love and is the source of love. But also, Scripture tells us that if you don't love your neighbor, you don't really love God, you are just giving Him lip service. Because those who really love God *will* love His people (1 John 4:7–8, 19–21). This doesn't mean that from the minute we are saved, we will love everyone perfectly all the time. We are all on a *journey* of sanctification, becoming more like Jesus every day. None of us has arrived. We will continue to struggle and grow in all areas of sanctification, including loving other people like Jesus

does. But Scripture makes it clear that loving God and loving others go hand in hand. They are two sides of the same coin. You can't have one without the other.

The people in the churches James was writing to knew this. As Jews, they had heard "love your neighbor as yourself" their whole lives, even before becoming Christians, because that command comes from Leviticus 19:18. But people often misunderstood what Scripture meant by "neighbor." In the ancient world, most people thought of their neighbor as the people in their tribe, those closest to them – family, close friends and literal neighbors. They felt they only had to love those in their tribe. But in the Old Testament law, God completely flipped this idea. He redefined "neighbor." God told His people they must treat the foreigner living among them like the native-born, like their neighbor. And love them as themselves, just like their family (Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19). They were commanded to care for poor and the vulnerable because God loves the poor and the vulnerable (Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:17–21; Proverbs 14:31).

When an expert in the law asked, "Who is my neighbor," Jesus supported this definition of neighbor by telling the story of the good Samaritan. In that time, Samaritans and Jews hated each other; they did not associate with each other at all. In the story, a Jewish man was in need, but none of the Jewish leaders who walked by helped their fellow Jewish man, their literal neighbor. But the Samaritan helped him even though he was not his literal "neighbor." He was even from the "enemy tribe." Jesus reiterated what was taught in the Old Testament – the neighbor we are supposed to love as ourselves is every human being on this planet.

Showing partiality is a sin because it breaks the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Every human being is precious to God; every human being is made in His image. When we treat others as "less than," it dishonors the image of God in them. Whatever we do to others, even the "least of these" by the world's definition, we do to Jesus (Matthew 25:31–46).

Q: How have you seen people creating tribalism in our culture? How have you seen it done in some churches?

Q: What difference would it make in our community if we truly loved everyone as our neighbor, even the least of these?

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Took

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How would you score yourself if you had to rate the way you serve others between 1 and 5? This week, look for opportunities to show love to others—especially to 'the least of these'—and think about ways your LifeGroup can serve together. Visit prestonwoodmissions.org to discover opportunities to serve both near and far. This helpful site provides the tools to identify and schedule mission events that best suit your LifeGroup.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on ways you have seen an “us vs. them” tribalism in our culture – in all different arenas, not just politically. What effect does it have on our nation, our community, our world? How does it impact the way you think? How does it impact the way you treat other people who are not in your “tribe”? What difference would it make in the world if the Church tore down those dividing walls of tribalism and truly loved all people?

PRAY for God to open your eyes to ways you can love the vulnerable around you. Ways you can reach out to them, meet them where they are, and welcome them into the family of God. Confess any areas in which you have an “us vs. them” mentality and ask God to tear down the dividing walls in your heart and in our community.

ACT: Reach out to “them.” Reflect on someone in your life who you may consider a “them” (versus an “us”) in your life. Someone who is on “the other side” from you or that the world wants you to consider on the other side of you. Reach out to them and simply ask to have coffee or lunch or something to start building a relationship with them, no strings attached, no agenda.

¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/02/28/oscar-2025-heres-whats-inside-the-200000-oscar-gift-bag-.html>

² <https://www.oscars.org/oscar-ceremonies/2025>