

Responsibility of Those Called

Devotional Reading: [Amos 5:7-15](#)

Bckground Scripture: [James 2:1-12](#)

James 2:1-12

1 My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.

2 For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment;

3 And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool:

4 Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?

5 Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?

6 But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats?

7 Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?

8 If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well:

9 But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are con-

vinced of the law as transgressors.

10 For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

11 For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law.

12 So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.

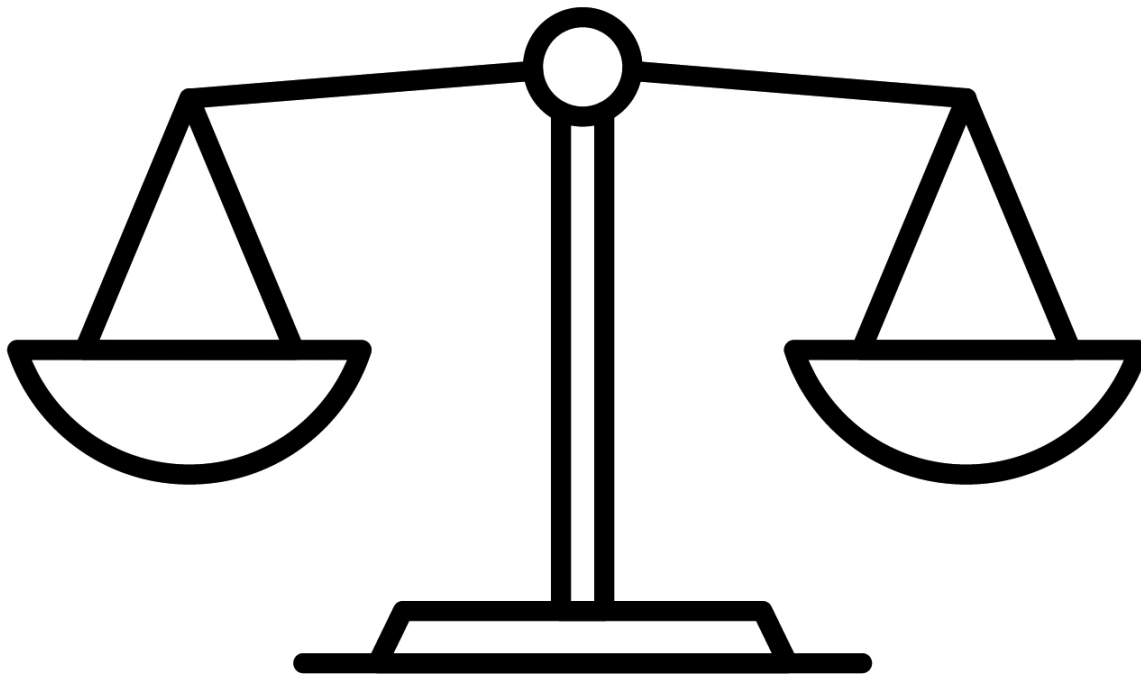


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Key Text

Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?

—James 2:5

From Darkness to Light

Unit 3: God's Call

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize why favoritism is incompatible with the Christ-honoring life.
2. Compare and contrast the biblical concept of favoritism with modern definitions of discrimination.
3. Propose a way to identify and correct occasions when his or her church does not treat people equally.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

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- B. Lesson Context: James, the Man
- C. Lesson Context: James, the Letter

I. Problem Identified (James 2:1–4)

- A. Partiality Forbidden (v. 1)
- B. Partiality Illustrated (vv. 2–3)
- C. Partiality’s Implication (v. 4)

The Good Girl

II. Problem Evaluated (James 2:5–7)

- A. God’s Right Action (v. 5)
- B. Readers’ Wrong Actions (vv. 6–7)

III. Problem’s Solution (James 2:8–12)

- A. Fulfilling the Law (v. 8)
- B. Breaking the Law (vv. 9–11)

No Irish Need Apply

- C. Liberation by Law (v. 12)

Conclusion

- A. Love, Not Favoritism
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Cephas *See-fus.*

Diaspora *Dee-as-puh-ruh.*

Josephus *Jo-see-fus.*

Maccabees *Mack-uh-bees.*

Samaritan *Suh-mare-uh-tun.*

Introduction

A. Playing Favorites

With regard to divisions among followers of Christ, a tendency has been to focus on doctrinal divides (example: meaning of the Lord's Supper). But it's easy to see that other reasons for division also weigh heavily. One of those involves race. In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously noted that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning was "the most segregated hour in this nation." Churches have made needed correctives in that regard over the ensuing 60 years, with more yet to be done.

Various demographics point to other divides among believers. Researchers occasionally note that denominational affiliation correlates with socioeconomic status. These observations are not airtight—there are exceptions. But they point to a truth of human nature: we tend to associate with people who are like us. The more differences that exist in a group—whether cultural, socioeconomic, or what have you—the greater the likelihood of instability in that group.

The problems faced by the readers of the book of James are readily recognizable as the selfsame problems we face in churches today. Likewise, the solutions James presents are just as applicable for us today.

B. Lesson Context: James, the Man

There are four or five men named James in the New Testament, so we should take care not to mix them up (see [Mark 1:19–20](#); [15:40](#); [Luke 6:15](#); [Acts 1:13](#)). Tradition has taken the phrase "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" ([James 1:1](#)) to refer to the James who was the half brother of Jesus (see [Matthew 13:55](#); [Mark 6:3](#)). Along with Jesus' other half brothers, James did not believe in Jesus before the resurrection ([John 7:3–5](#)). By the Day of Pentecost, however, Jesus' brothers had come

to believe in Him (see [Acts 1:14](#)). Paul indicates that James had been a witness of the risen Jesus ([1 Corinthians 15:7](#)).

James had become a leader in the Jerusalem church by the mid-AD 40s ([Acts 12:17](#); [15:13](#); [21:18](#)). His exact role is not clear in the text, but Paul groups him with the apostles and lists him alongside Cephas (that is, Peter) and John as “pillars” of the church ([Galatians 2:9](#); see [1:19](#)). The significance of this is heightened when we consider the centrality of Jerusalem to the earliest Christians. The Jerusalem church was more than just one congregation among many. It was the mother church; what happened there mattered to all Christianity. We see the truth of this, as well as James’s concrete impact, in the account of the Jerusalem council in [Acts 15](#). There James gave the final, decisive word on a vital doctrinal matter after Peter and Paul had spoken their minds. The event portrays James as an observant Jew who expected Gentile converts to observe only certain foundational aspects of the Old Testament law (see [Acts 15:19–20](#)).

Outside of the New Testament, the Jewish historian Josephus (born around AD 37) dates the martyrdom of James to AD 62.

C. Lesson Context: James, the Letter

Given the details of James’s life and death, a reasonable supposition is that the letter was written in the AD 50s, if not in the 40s. That makes it one of the earliest of the New Testament documents. Likely it was written from Jerusalem.

Structurally, the letter lacks certain typical features of an ancient letter, features that we see throughout Paul’s letters. After opening with standard features of sender, recipients, and greeting, it lacks the typical thanksgiving and closing. The writer proceeds loosely from topic to

topic, appealing to the Old Testament often. The tenor of the letter is thoroughly Jewish, having been written by a Christian of Jewish background to Christians of Jewish background—fellow believers under duress. These recipients of the letter are “scattered abroad,” a reference to what is often called the Diaspora ([James 1:1](#); compare [John 7:35](#); [1 Peter 1:1–2](#)).

I. Problem Identified

([James 2:1–4](#))

A. Partiality Forbidden (v. 1)

1. My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.

What does God's law require of you?



Visual for [Lesson 12](#). Ask learners to silently consider this question for one minute before discussing the final set of questions together.

The opening sentence of today's text is a plain thesis statement that introduces the subject to be discussed: *respect of persons*. Though the term *respect* may suggest to our ears a positive regard for others, it translates a word that indicates partiality or favoritism: showing attention and honor to some people and not to others. Such a practice cannot exist alongside faith in Jesus, the one who died for all.

God's own nature in this regard is seen in several places in the Old Testament. According to [Deuteronomy 10:17](#), "the Lord your God is God of gods, ... which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward" (see also [2](#)

[Chronicles 19:7](#); compare [1 Samuel 16:7](#)). The New Testament further confirms this truth about God (see [Acts 10:34](#); [Romans 2:11](#); [Ephesians 6:9](#); [Colossians 3:25](#)). What is said of God himself is likewise commanded of the people: “Thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour” ([Leviticus 19:15](#); see also [Proverbs 24:23](#); compare [John 7:24](#)).

Per the custom of the era, the term *brethren* includes both men and women. This emphasizes that all Christians are part of a family that is drawn together by the blood of Christ, a tie stronger than earthly blood relationships ([Luke 14:26](#)). In this family there can be no favoritism.

B. Partiality Illustrated (vv. 2–3)

2. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment.

The word *if* translates a Greek word that is frequently used to introduce a hypothetical situation. Even so, the scenario described here seems realistic regarding situations that have taken place in the *assembly*. The Greek word behind this translation is not, as we might suppose, the word for “church.” Rather, it is the word translated “synagogue(s)” dozens of times in the New Testament. If this comes as a surprise, recall that James is writing to Christians of Jewish background (see [Lesson Context](#)), members of “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” ([James 1:1](#)).

As we see throughout the Gospels, the synagogue was the usual place of worship and religious instruction for first-century Jews ([Matthew 4:23](#); etc.). Trips to the temple in Jerusalem were reserved for major holi-

days and extraordinary circumstances. Christians of Jewish background apparently continued to refer to their gathering place(s) under the traditional name.

In the scenario that James presents, it is uncertain whether the two men who enter are visitors or regular attendees in the assembly. What is important to the teaching point is that one sports the *gold ring* of a well-to-do person, while the other is *a poor man*. Both men are described according to their clothing: *goodly apparel* and *vile raiment*. In the ancient world, clothing indicated one's role and status ([Matthew 11:8](#); [Acts 12:21](#)). Clothing could also indicate gender ([Deuteronomy 22:5](#)), allegiance (nonbiblical [2 Maccabees 4:12](#)), or widowhood ([Genesis 38:19](#)). We are to understand that the first man possesses considerable social status and the wealth that goes with it, while the second man has neither.

3. And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool.

To *have respect* means something like “show special regard for,” and that is precisely what James condemned in [James 2:1](#) (above). The believers had been looking at the clothing of each man and providing preferential treatment on that basis. The meaning of the word *gay* has, of course, changed since the *King James Version* came into being. Here it translates the same word rendered “goodly” in [James 2:2](#) and means something like “shining,” “resplendent,” or “luxurious” (compare [Acts 10:30](#); [Revelation 15:6](#); [19:8](#)).

The word translated *poor* is used in [Revelation 3:17](#) in a context of spiritual poverty, but here the word occurs in a physical sense (also in [James 2:2](#), [5–6](#)). Note well that the offer to the poor man to *stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool* does not entail the same respect or

consideration.

What Do You Think?

What examples of favoritism have you seen or experienced?

Digging Deeper

What are the potential consequences for the church's witness if these patterns are seen in God's gathered people?

C. Partiality's Implication (v. 4)

4. Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?

There are two accusations here that grow naturally out of the situation that James has presented. They are formed as rhetorical questions, and they both assume that the answer is "Yes!" Today we would express the idea of being *partial in yourselves* as "discrimination" or "showing prejudice."

The second phrase in the verse makes an equally pointed statement. *Judges of evil thoughts* means "judges who have evil thoughts." If judging is to be objective, based on law and not personal preference, then rich and poor are to be treated equally. Only an evil judge, perhaps one hoping for a bribe or favor from a rich person, shows partiality. Jesus condemned this kind of judging in [John 7:24](#). To have evil thoughts is a matter of the heart (see [Matthew 15:19](#)). The evaluation criteria being used by those to whom James wrote is contrary to the very nature of God (compare [James 4:11–12](#)). In following customary patterns of responding to rich and poor, some first-century Christians were unwittingly denying the God whom they claimed to serve.

The Good Girl

Two sisters spent the day at their grandmother's house. They played outside on the small farm and swang on the tire swing in the shade of the big tree. Everything was fine, an idyllic afternoon in a pastoral setting, until the sisters started arguing. It was low-key to begin with—fussing over some tiny matter of disagreement. But before long, the sisters were yelling and fighting.

Inside the house, the grandmother heard their voices and went out to see what was happening. Grabbing the younger girl, the grandmother began to scold her fiercely. The older girl stood dumbfounded. Hadn't she herself also been part of the arguing and fighting? Why should her younger sister get all the punishment?

“Grandma! We were both fighting. It's my fault too!” the older girl protested. But her grandmother brushed her off. The older girl looked at her younger sibling, both with tears in their eyes at the injustice of it. There was no apparent reason for the favoritism. If this situation were played out on a regular basis, what consequences do you foresee for the older girl and her sister? What is revealed about the grandmother's heart?

—L. M. W.

II. Problem Evaluated

(James 2:5–7)

A. God's Right Action (v. 5)

5. Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath

promised to them that love him?

James presents here the first of three arguments that indicate why showing partiality is wrong. The first argument points out that favoritism is inconsistent with the fact that *God has chosen the poor of this world*. It is presented in the form of a rhetorical question that expects the answer to be yes.

The way James frames his question might be jarring to our ears. What is so special about the poor? To answer, we might look again at the numerous Old Testament texts that address this; [Psalms 9:18; 10:14; 18:27](#); and [Isaiah 11:3–4](#) are just a few. To these we add New Testament texts such as the song of Mary in [Luke 1:46–55 \(lesson 4\)](#), particularly verses [52](#) and [53](#). James's position is entirely consistent with these.

What Do You Think?

How can material wealth be a hindrance to faith?

Digging Deeper

What attitudes and practices keep material wealth from stunting spiritual growth?

B. Readers' Wrong Actions (vv. 6–7)

6a. But ye have despised the poor.

James's outlook might be foreign for those of us today who live comfortable lives and attend churches that are not always very welcoming of the poor (whether intentionally or not). This was at least partly the case for those among James's original readers who had *despised the poor*. Some of those readers had done so by the overt discriminatory treatment noted in [James 2:2–3](#) (above). This brings us to James's second

argument, next.

6b. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats?

James's second of three arguments is also framed as a rhetorical question that expects an affirmative answer. Favoritism is not only inconsistent with the nature of God; it is also downright illogical, given that it is the *rich* who are a source of oppression ([Mark 12:38–40](#); etc.). Even so, deference toward the rich seems to be a human tendency. We are so drawn in by wealth and status (celebrity) that we will compromise our convictions if given the chance to be close to wealth and status, even if it's harmful to us.

The irony in this is obvious when we are speaking of other people. But have we examined ourselves for these tendencies? How prone are we to join in to the cult of celebrity that idolizes the extremely wealthy and famous? This even happens in the church. Consider the rise (and fall) of celebrity writers and megachurch ministers in recent decades; in such cases, believers have at times bent over backwards to accommodate someone who very likely cared very little about them or their situation. James confronts readers yet today in order to snap us out of such behavior.

7. Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?

This can be seen as James's third argument or an extension of the second argument. By their behavior, the rich who oppress (and not all did back then or do so today) pretend to godliness (again, see [Mark 12:40](#)). Such pretense amounts to blasphemy against the *worthy name* of Jesus (see [Romans 2:17–24](#), quoting [Isaiah 52:5](#) and [Ezekiel 36:22](#)).

III. Problem's Solution

(James 2:8–12)

A. Fulfilling the Law (v. 8)

8. If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well.

This is the only place in the Bible where the phrase *the royal law* is found. James immediately reveals what he means by this in identifying it with [Leviticus 19:18](#): “*Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.*” The vital importance of this imperative is seen in Jesus’ declaration that it was one of the two greatest commandments ([Matthew 22:34–40](#); [Mark 12:28–34](#); compare [Romans 13:8–10](#); [Galatians 5:13–14](#)).

Loving one’s neighbor excludes partiality and prejudice. Jesus illustrated this truth by telling a story in which a Samaritan—the kind of person despised by much of His audience—generously cared for a victim of a crime ([Luke 10:25–37](#)). The Law of Moses itself is clear in its exclusion of partiality. Unlike other legal codes of the ancient world, that law did not provide different levels of protection for different classes of people. Kings and servants, the wealthy and the poor, Israelites and foreigners are subject to the same standards (examples: [Exodus 23:3](#); [Numbers 15:15–16](#); [Deuteronomy 1:16–17](#)).

What Do You Think?

What benefit is there in learning to love yourself?

Digging Deeper

How does loving others help keep self-love from becoming a sinful preoccupation?

B. Breaking the Law (vv. 9–11)

9. But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.

Here James is as explicit as he can be: to *have respect to persons* (partiality, favoritism, discrimination) is to *commit sin*. The older use of the word *convinced* is to be understood in the sense of “convicted”—as in a trial one is convicted of a crime by *the law* that has been violated. Discrimination is a failure to love, and love is at the core of the law of Christ (compare [1 Corinthians 9:21](#); [Galatians 6:2](#)). James expected his readers to grasp this fact.

What Do You Think?

How do personal preferences regarding personality, etc., affect your treatment of others?

Digging Deeper

What do you (or can you do) to prevent these preferences from yielding sinful results?

No Irish Need Apply

From the mid-1800s to the early 1900s, discrimination against Irish immigrants in the United States ran high. They were stereotyped as lazy, hot-tempered, and clannish alcoholics. This stemmed from a lengthy discrimination against the Irish in Europe, where they were seen as troublemakers. Favoritism could be seen in the hiring practices of many businesses. Signs advertising open jobs often used the phrase “No Irish need apply.” This led many people of Irish descent to try to get ahead by hiding their cultural identity.

Today discrimination toward those of Irish descent seems minimal. Even so, solving racial or cultural discrimination has been uneven at best. Progress (or lack thereof) is often in the eye of the beholder. Discrimination (which is unequal treatment without a rational basis) seems minimal unless *you* have been the one discriminated against!

Countries try to solve the problem of unequal treatment through enactment and enforcement of laws. The effectiveness of such laws in changing behavior and practices is a topic best debated elsewhere. But what may be beyond question is their ineffectiveness in changing *hearts*. Without the healing grace of Jesus in our lives, we will still be vulnerable to harboring attitudes of favoritism. And what grows in one's heart eventually makes itself known in behavior ([Mark 7:20–23](#); [James 1:14–15](#)). Here's a question you may not have considered: In what ways have you tacitly approved of discrimination by accepting preferential treatment yourself?

—L. M. W.

10. For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

To show the seriousness of this matter, James makes an argument familiar to his readers of Jewish background. The Law of Moses presents itself not as a collection of individual commands but as a unified whole. It is both many laws and a single unit of law. The standard that God gave His people was not so that they would obey some or much of it, but all of it. So the failure to keep *one* part is the failure to keep the law in its entirety. To break *a* law is to break *the whole law*.

11. For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law.

James illustrates the point just made with an easily grasped example, drawn from the Ten Commandments (see [Exodus 20:1–17](#); [Deuteronomy 5:6–21](#)).

C. Liberation by Law (v. 12)

12. So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.

Knowing and understanding all this, James's readers should *speak* and *do* in accordance with it. We naturally think of laws in terms of restrictions. But this *law of liberty* is freeing (also [James 1:25](#); compare [Romans 8:2](#); [1 Peter 2:16](#)). This law is another way of expressing the concept behind the royal law ([James 2:8](#), above). As the readers contemplated God's law, they should have experienced fear because disobedience invites judgment. But they should also have had hope because obedience brings true freedom.

Conclusion

A. Love, Not Favoritism

Today's text is justly famous for the specific sin that it identifies and condemns. Discrimination grows out of our fallen human nature—a nature that is drawn to wealth and status, or at least proximity to it. Everyone is subject to its allure, and we all can think of instances when the temptation has been present for us. James's teachings are, therefore, for us as well as for his initial readers. May we take this lesson as an encouragement to examine the patterns of our lives and to root out prejudice, replacing it with love.

What Do You Think?

What idea in this lesson is most challenging to you?

Digging Deeper

How will you seek God's guidance on this issue in the coming week?

B. Prayer

Father, may Your Holy Spirit teach us to see those who walk the earth with us as You see them. As we do, deliver us from the sins of partiality, prejudice, and preference. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God doesn't play favorites, and neither should we.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with KJV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the KJV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Before class, prepare six slips of paper. On the first slip, write the name of a wealthy person your class will recognize. Write the name of an important athlete in your area on the second slip. On the third slip,

write the name of a celebrity that your group will quickly identify with. On each of the three other slips, write the name of a person whom your group would identify as not being important or known to society at large. Arrange the chairs in your room so that some seats appear a little more “premier” than others.

Ask participants to create a seating chart for each of the celebrities on the slips of paper by setting the slips of paper on the chosen seats. This might require someone to move. Repeat for the slips of paper of people who were identified as not important or known. Allow a few minutes of discussion as to why people were seated where they were. Be sure to give everyone the opportunity to openly express their feelings about such hypothetical favoritism.

Alternative. Distribute copies of “The Dangers of Favoritism” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated.

After either activity, give the group time to talk about favoritism. Lead into the Bible study by saying, “Favoritism can be dangerous to society and in our own lives. In today’s text, James gives us a warning against allowing favoritism within the church.”

Into the Word

Use the “Lesson Context: James, the Man” section of the commentary to briefly talk about the context and the James who wrote today’s letter.

Divide the class into three small groups, designating one group as the **Respect of Persons Group**, the second group as the **Truly Wealthy Group**, and the third group as the **Royal Law Group**. Distribute handouts of the questions below (you prepare) for in-group discussions.

Respect of Persons Group. Read [James 2:1–4](#). 1—What is different about the two main characters in these verses? 2—How differently are they treated? Why? 3—Describe how their treatment might make them feel about being part of that congregation.

Truly Wealthy Group. Read [James 2:5–7](#). 1—How is dishonoring the poor wrong? 2—What is wrong with honoring the rich? 3—How does God treat the rich and the poor compared to how society usually treats them?

Royal Law Group. Read [James 2:8–12](#). 1—What does James identify as the “royal law”? 2—Why does this law make respect of persons, or favoritism, a sin? 3—How does the “law of liberty” contrast with the Old Testament law?

After calling time, have groups present their findings in whole-class discussion. Use the commentary to correct misconceptions.

Into Life

Write the following on the board: “*There is no respect of persons with God*” ([Romans 2:11](#)). Conduct a whole-class brainstorming session by first talking about what the verse means, then challenging learners to suggest ways Christians should treat other people based on how God views them. Distribute index cards and pens to the learners. Invite everyone to write one way they pledge to treat people during the week. It should be based on how God views people.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Welcoming Newcomers” activity from the activity page. Have learners complete it individually (in a minute or less) before discussing conclusions in small groups.

After calling time under either alternative, have small groups talk about how you, as a church, might improve in not showing favoritism in

your congregation. Close with a prayer.