

Responsibility of Those Called

Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light
Unit 3: God's Call

Sunday School Lesson for the week of February 19, 2023
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: James 2:1-12

Key Verse

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? (James 2:5)

Lesson Aims

- To emphasize the vital connection between beliefs and behavior
- To examine our tendencies and unconscious biases
- To overturn the fallacy that the Lord only helps those who help themselves
- To reveal how we may turn a blind eye to people's faults because of their higher social status
- To learn to look at people more in terms of their faith than their social status
- To learn that favoritism is not a side issue or a secular issue, but central to a life of faith

The Connection Between Beliefs and Behavior

I encourage you to read the whole Epistle of James. The one who wrote this epistle is most likely not one of the twelve disciples who was named James, but one of Jesus' half-brothers mentioned in the gospels. He became the head of the Jerusalem Church, the mother church of the Christian movement. When you read all of this Epistle, one of the impressions you're left with is the emphasis it makes between faith and good works, beliefs and behavior, not only hearing the word but doing the word.

James is famous for saying that faith without the corresponding actions to back it up is a dead faith. He gives an example: "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" James illustrates here that we must do more than put on a show of faith or say the right words. Our actions and behavior must match up with our stated beliefs.

Why do you think it is easier to put on a show of faith than live out our faith? How does the world miss out when we only put on a show of religious faith? How do we miss out? How does God miss out?

The first verse of the scripture passage under focus really drives home the connection between belief and behavior.

¹ My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

James focuses on the problem of showing favoritism. Showing favoritism is treating some people better than others for whatever reason. He presents the problem by asking a rhetorical question. When James puts it this way, he is going ahead and putting it out there that showing favoritism is not consistent with believing in Jesus as our glorious Lord and Messiah. Yet, the way James frames the question tells us that James knew too many people were indeed showing favoritism, even though they professed to believe in Jesus. Had they thought about this inconsistency before? Perhaps James is pointing out the fact that committing this sin regularly escapes the notice of Christians.

The theme of the winter quarter's lessons is moving "from darkness to light." A part of moving from darkness to light is becoming aware of the sins we commit unconsciously. The unconscious ways we bring harm are shrouded in a kind of darkness. When we become conscious of them and bring our behavior in line with our beliefs, we move into the light.

Examining Our Tendencies and Unconscious Biases

In the next verses, James illustrates his point about showing favoritism.

² For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³ and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here in a good place, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," ⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

When I was a youth pastor I would go to the middle school and high school closest to the church and visit the youth of my church. (I had gotten permission from the school officials.) What I observed in the school cafeteria was the way the students gathered. The seating arrangement around the tables in the cafeteria revealed the way the students naturally divided up into table arrangements according to social distinctions. It was as if the movements had been choreographed.

The style of dress differed from table to table. For some you could see their socio-economic levels represented in the clothing they wore. For some their style of dress expressed something of their identity and their belonging to their particular social group. I realized it was the same way when I was their age. I could see it more clearly as an adult observing these youth than I could when I was a youth myself and more immersed in the situation.

I knew the interests of the members of my youth group and realized at school they were sitting with other classmates who shared similar interests. For instance, one of my youth was all into theater, and the people he sat with in school were all into theater.

I knew one of the members of my youth group was socially awkward. When I went to the high school cafeteria, I would see him sitting with his friends and having a good time. It was good for me to see this. Seeing this youth and his friends made me realize the way socially awkward people can gravitate toward each other, and then they do not seem as socially awkward.

Other youth seemed to be the opposite of socially awkward. They moved around with an air of confidence. I could spot them in the middle school and high school I visited. I remembered their kind in my schools when I was a student. I envied them. People like this often gravitate toward each other, too.

I noticed that the members of my youth program, although they were together on Sunday evenings, were sitting at different tables from each other at school. This picture was not shocking, it was predictable.

Our social patterns often follow the path of least resistance—the least effort. I understand this well because I am an introvert. When I go into a crowded room with tables, at a meeting for instance, I can feel the anxiety in me rise. There are times I want to gravitate to people I know for self-preservation more than anything else. There are other times I want to break out of the familiar pattern and sit with people whom I don't know as much. Because I am an introvert, this takes more effort. My point is that we make social distinctions all the time in the way we move among people.

Let me jump to another situation. I had been appointed to a new church. My parents came to visit me and my family, and they wanted to see my new church and worship with us. My parents were naturally oblivious to the seating arrangements in the church. As you know, many people (including myself) like to sit in the same general area each time they come to church. For some, it is not merely the same general area, but the one they call “their pew.” The pew in front of their pew or behind their pew may be completely empty, but those pews won't do. My parents sat in the pew of one of my church members, and I saw the member approach her pew. The church member was the only one from her family who had arrived at that point. I knew this member and saw the scowl develop across her face. She asked my parents to move and told them that her family was arriving and would be sitting in the pew.

When the service started, I was giving the welcome, and then welcomed my parents, and pointed them out. I could see the look of surprise on the church member's face when she realized that it was the preacher's parents whom she had gruffly asked to move. When I invited the congregation to welcome one another, you would not believe how effusive the church member was toward my parents in her welcome. Boy, did she smile like I had never seen her smile before. She was gracious. The way she “turned it on” when she found out who my parents were was actually humorous to my parents. She had behaved one way toward my parents when she saw them as ordinary visitors and then behaved toward them very differently when she discovered they were the preacher's parents.

Just for the record, neither my parents nor I thought that they should have been shown deference because they were the preacher's parents. My thought was that I want any visitor to be treated

with kindness and given a gracious welcome, and not feel they have made a mistake by inadvertently sitting in the wrong pew.

James used an illustration of a well-dressed, well-to-do person being treated one way, and a poorly dressed, poor person being treated differently in the church. They were ushered to different parts of meeting space. I think that James was challenging his audience.

He would want us to examine our tendencies when it comes to making social distinctions. He would want us to examine how we make these kinds of distinctions in our behavior patterns without thinking. He would want us to uncover any lack of awareness we might have. A term I am learning to embrace is the term “unconscious bias.” I am grateful for this term.

Some people justify their bigotry and prejudice. Some people discriminate, and they do not hide the beliefs that drive their behavior. They are biased against certain groups of people and do not care who knows it. Some people hold these beliefs about people and do not believe that these beliefs are in conflict with belonging to Christ. James would disagree. This is why we want to get inside the arguments that James uses.

I also want to get inside the claims James makes in order to become more sensitive to the way certain biases may be influencing my own behavior. I believe in sanctification. I believe that the saving grace that affords me the forgiveness of my sins is just the beginning of what the Lord wants to do in my life. Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit to root out sin from me and conform me more and more to the image of Christ. I believe that God wants to work in my life, transforming me until the day I die and pass from this life into the next life.

So, why not? Why not let the uncovering of my unconscious biases be one of the things God works on? Why would I feel threatened by God exposing these tendencies in me? The truth is that demonstrating bias, favoritism, and partiality is sinful and ugly. I am ready to let Christ shine his light in me to reveal any wicked way in me. Aren't you? Let's continue to lean in to what James says.

The Lord Helps Those Who Cannot Help Themselves

The reason that we treat someone who is well-dressed and well-to-do differently than the person who is poorly dressed and poor is because we are quick to make assumptions. We are quick to make moral judgments without knowing their story. We are quick to make more-than and less-than distinctions. Would it change your thinking to know that God looks at people differently—sometimes maybe even the opposite of the way that we do?

⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor person.

Let that sink in. God has chosen the poor. God affords a place to the poor as heirs of the kingdom that God has promised to those who love him. God has even given the poor a place of distinction, which is to be rich in faith.

When my wife, Kay, and I went to Tijuana with a group from our church on a mission trip, we knew that we were in for a great experience because our daughter, Rebecca, had been the year before. Because we were joining under the same leadership team, we knew we would be going through the same experiences and going to the same places. Rebecca told us about Francesca. She said, "You need to meet her when you go." What was it about Francesca? We knew she had made an impression on our daughter.

As the week progressed, we had gone through many rich experiences and met wonderful people. Early on, Kay told the leaders that we would like to meet Francesca. They said they could not make any promises because we would be meeting a lot of people and doing a lot of things. One of the things we did at the place where we were staying was sort fruits and vegetables from crates to bags so that we could give out a healthy variety to the residents of a particular neighborhood.

Then the time came for us to travel to that neighborhood. There was a sea of humanity as far as the eye could see, which was spread out across a steep hillside. People were living in plywood dwellings shoved very close to each other. There were old tires planted along the hillside to control erosion and to create terraces. Kay had kept our daughter informed where we were during the trip, and when Kay texted her where we were, she said this is where Francesca lived. Still, it seemed as if we were looking for a needle in a haystack. Kay mentioned Francesca again to the leaders, and they still could not make any promises.

As we made our way, we did happen to get in the area where Francesca lived. Kay got excited. Francesca lived down the hillside from the road. It would not be easy to climb down. Kay had kept to the road up until this point. Nothing would keep her though from getting down to Francesca. We all helped each other get to her. When we arrived, Francesca was there. Then we had to use translators to help us communicate that we were Rebecca's parents. Francesca remembered Rebecca. On the walls of her plywood dwelling were scripture verses and prayers hand-painted and drawn on the walls in various colors. Francesca and her family had very little, especially compared to our standards, but everything in her home, her conversation, and her demeanor conveyed that she was indeed rich in faith.

When the scripture says that God chose the poor to be rich in faith, it almost sounds like God is giving preferential treatment. Let's think about that.

Have you ever heard the phrase that says God helps those who help themselves? It is said often enough and with such an air of authority that people even think the phrase comes from somewhere in the Bible. It comes from the First Book of Hallucinations! In other words, it is not biblical. In fact, you could easily argue that God helps those who cannot help themselves. God comes to their aid, and God comes to their defense. Here is a sampling of scriptures:

“Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up,” says the LORD; “I will place them in the safety for which they long.” Psalm 12:5

You would confound the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge. Psalm 14:6

Happy are those who consider the poor; the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble. Psalm 41:1

I know that the LORD maintains the cause of the needy and executes justice for the poor. Psalm 140:12

Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him. Proverbs 14:31

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD and will be repaid in full. Proverbs 19:17

The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all. Proverbs 22:2

All these verses give us insight into how God views the poor. Because Jesus is the Word made flesh, we should also consider how Jesus spoke of the poor.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed.” – Jesus (Luke 4:18)

Then Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” Luke 6:20

“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” – Jesus (Luke 14:13)

Two more occasions bear mention.

At the beginning of the 21st chapter of Luke, we’re told about an occasion where Jesus was observing rich people putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. Jesus told his audience, *“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them, for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”* (Luke 21:1-3) In this story, the poor widow is the hero. We are reminded that the poor are capable of giving extravagantly when you consider not the amount of the gift, but the proportion of the gift to the person’s assets and income.

In the 25th chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells a parable of a day when the king will judge all people. They will be judged based on how they treated the king. When he was hungry, did people give him food? When he was thirsty, did they give him something to drink? When he was a stranger, did they welcome him? When he was naked, did they give him clothing? When he was sick, did they take care of him. When he was in prison, did they visit him? Some were surprised to find

out that they had done all of these things although they couldn't remember even being in contact with the king. According to Jesus' parable, the king will answer them, *'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'* (Matthew 25:40)

The Lord has a soft place in his heart for the poor. They are in a state of dependence upon others for survival. They struggle to eke out a living for themselves and their dependents. The rewards of their work are not commensurate with the efforts of their work. God recognizes that they are dependent, so God feeds and clothes them and ministers to them with his presence. One of the ways God does this is through his people. This is why, according to Proverbs 19:17, that being kind to the poor and giving to them is like "lending" to the Lord, and the Lord, in a thousand different ways, repays these lenders in full. When God's people help the poor, we are helping God deliver on his promise to help those who cannot help themselves. We are becoming a part of the answer to people's prayers. God designed it this way.

The Lord does not judge the poor for being poor, nor should we. The Lord does not want us to spend our time blaming the victims of poverty. The Lord does want us to see their riches in faith and childlike dependence on God and imitate the joy and peace they find in the simple things. I can testify that all of us who went on the mission trip to Tijuana came back with changed attitudes. Being with people who had so little but were so rich in faith made an indelible impression on us.

So, in this light I want to think even more about how I treat the poor.

Turning a Blind Eye Because of a Person's Higher Social Status

James makes the case that people show favoritism to well-to-do people and do not treat people as well who are poorly dressed. Why might we do this and not really be aware of it? I think about the way we name-drop. Do you ever find yourself dropping the names of the people you have met or know into conversation? Why do I do this? I want to be associated with them and want them to be associated with me. It raises my stock, so to speak. It feels like it raises my status to be associated with certain people.

When James noticed how people in the church treated the well-to-do differently, he asked them a question.

^{6b} Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into the court?

Perhaps James was saying that we treat well-to-do people better because in the back of our minds, we think they can do something for us. James wanted to challenge this idea, because in his experience, the rich could just as easily choose to oppress their inferiors and take them to court. Let me be clear, I do not think all rich people look down on others and oppress them. The point I hear James making is that we may give a free pass to people who are well-to-do because they are well-to-do. This is not right when we tend to make negative assumptions about poor people. Why do we turn a blind eye to the harmful acts committed by people of a high social

status? Why might we be harsher to the poor just for being poor, who haven't even done anything against us—who are not in a position to do anything against us?

Looking at People in Terms of their Faith Instead of their Social Status

James did not think that the rich guests to whom his audience was showing favoritism were all Christians, or at least mature Christians.

⁷ Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

The rich guests who were coming into the assembly, who were being treated like dignitaries, were still blaspheming Christ at times out in the public sphere according to James. They were either not Christians yet or still very immature Christians. Yet, there were poor people coming into the assembly who might have been more receptive to Christ or further ahead in their relationship with Christ who were being treated poorly.

We should look at people in terms of their faith, or budding faith, instead of their social status. Let's assume that the guests in question, both the rich person and the poor person, were coming into the assembly as inquirers to the Christian faith. To treat the wealthier person better than the poor person would do neither the rich person nor the poor person any good in coming to faith in Christ. In fact, it would do them harm.

If wealthier guests saw that they were being treated the same as anyone else, no better than and no less than anyone else, rich or poor, this would have an effect on them. If poor people saw that they were being treated the same as anyone else, this would have an effect on them. Wealthier people might get the idea that their status is not worth comparing to the riches of faith they could enjoy as followers of Christ. Being treated the same as anyone else would humble them in a good way. People who were less fortunate would immediately notice that they are being esteemed in the community of faith in a way that they have never been esteemed out in the world. Being treated the same way as anyone else would lift them up in a good way.

There is a picture that hangs on my wall in my office that I had made when I served in a particular area. When I became the pastor of that church, I was told that there was not much competition in town. There were only two churches. The person telling me this left out the churches with African-American members and pastors. The picture in my office contains photographs of the 17 churches in and around the town I served. I realized how easy it is to operate within social boundaries set by race and class instead of our Christian identity. I decided to partner with African-American clergy to create an inter-church council of clergy and laity to see if we could find ways to cooperate and fellowship across boundaries of race and class and emphasize our shared Christian identity.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is 11 o'clock on Sunday morning." That was in 1963. Unfortunately, this still remains largely true today.

In the first century, Roman society was highly stratified. One of the ways the Romans sought to keep order throughout the empire was making sure everyone knew their place and stayed in their place. The New Testament Church, in all its newness, stood out in that environment as a social experiment in inclusive community. Rich and poor, free persons and slaves, men and women, Jews and Greeks worshiped together and shared a common life together. When they did it right, their social differences paled in comparison to what they shared in common in Christ. Their identity in Christ shaped their lives.

Even in the first century, however, things were not perfect. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the 11th chapter, contains the words of institution of the Lord's Supper. We still recite those words today in the liturgy for Holy Communion. Just before the words of institution, Paul had to address a brewing controversy. He tells them that he had been hearing of divisions that had found their way into their celebration of the Lord's Supper: "For when the time comes to eat, each of you proceeds to eat your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk." (1 Corinthians 11:21) People were bringing their meals to the celebration, but instead of sharing so that all could eat the same amount, the various groups kept to themselves, so that the disparities between the "haves" and the "have-nots" were painfully exposed for all to see. No wonder that Paul changed the rules. Instead of eating their dinner as a shared communal meal, they were told eat at home, so that the Lord's Supper would only be about the bread and the cup symbolizing Christ's body and blood.

This illustrates perfectly that the problem James was addressing is a perennial problem.

Not Showing Favoritism Is Not a Side Issue or a Secular Issue

We live in a polarized political climate. One of the casualties of this climate is that when Christians start talking about the social dimensions of the gospel people want to retreat to their political camps. For some, this kind of conversation may have begun to sound like "woke-ism." The word "woke" has created a flash point for sure. Some embrace the term with a little bit too much self-righteousness, and others seem to be at war with the term and everything it stands for.

I am trying to find a middle way. On the one hand, I want to be engaged in a process of awakening. On the other hand, I want to avoid seeming like I am "woke," as if my education is complete. I want to avoid the tendency to label those who are not as "woke" as I am. I recently came across a new term: "cultural humility." You may have become familiar with the term "cultural competence," which does have a noble purpose. I do want to grow in my competence to notice when I am not treating people with the same regard as the Letter of James bids me to do. I want to balance this process with a sense of humility. The point of cultural humility is to recognize that I am on a journey and others are on a journey. Humility puts me in a position to be curious and learn from people who are different from me, including those who are of a different race than I and those who are of a different socio-economic level than I.

According to James, this issue is not a side issue, nor is it a secular issue.

⁸ You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ⁹ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹ For the one who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery but you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

Notice that the command “to love your neighbor as yourself,” taken from Leviticus 19:18, is referred to as the royal law. It is seen as the second part of Jesus’ Great Commandment, second in importance only to the first part of the Great Commandment which is “to love the Lord your God.” To speak of this command as the royal law links loving our neighbor to the heart of the reign of God.

Once we begin to show partiality, however, we break this very law that is central to the reign of God. According to James, if we fail in this one point, we become guilty of breaking the whole law. We cannot start doing our own picking and choosing and think it is okay. Not showing partiality and favoritism is central to living out our faith in Christ.

¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.

When I think of the term, “the law of liberty” it makes me think of what Paul said about the fruit of the Spirit: “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. *There is no law against such things.*” (Galatians 5:22-23) When you are displaying the fruit of the Spirit, you are not rigidly following a law. There is a sense of abandon and freedom. You do not feel that you are under any constraint. When we love as Jesus loves, we are giving ourselves over to a pure love that has no bounds. When believers in a faith community are loving without favoritism, then the reign of God is breaking into that community.

Has this lesson provoked you in any way? What do you still have to learn? Did you find yourself wondering if you display any unconscious biases? How do you want to bring this matter to God? How do you see yourself coming into more peace and more joy by coming closer to all of God’s people?

Prayer

Gracious Lord, open the eyes of our hearts, that we might see ourselves more clearly and open ourselves up more to love your people, through Christ our Lord, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.