

1. Polluted by the World (James 1:27-2:4)

²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this:
to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from
being polluted by the world.

¹ My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ
must not show favoritism.

² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing
a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in.

³ If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say,
“Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or
“Sit on the floor by my feet,”

⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges
with evil thoughts?

- James 1:27-2:4 -

a. “Worldly” Doesn’t Mean What You Think It Means (James 1:27)

²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless
is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to
keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

- James 1:27 -

Often, we isolate verses like James 1:27b—“...keep oneself from being polluted by the world...”—and apply outdated or superficial interpretations. For example, a 1950’s Christian magazine condemned playing cards by associating them with morally questionable places like saloons and jails.

Jefferey Meyers notes:

“It is better to understand James to mean that his readers are to keep themselves from being [stained by] the ways of the world—the world’s wisdom, the world’s understanding of reality and suffering....James is reminding his readers that they are called to live not in submission to the rules and expectations of their world, but rather their allegiance and friendship is due to another – to their Lord and Savior, Jesus.”¹

¹ Meyers, Jeffrey. (28 March 2022). *Wisdom for Dissidents: The Epistle of James Through New Eyes*. Athanasius Press ISBN-13 978-1735169095, page 109

This plays out in the issue of favouritism—where people treat the wealthy or influential with more honour, hoping to gain something in return. It’s a behavior deeply embedded in our culture, from churches to car dealerships, where VIPs get special treatment.

James is calling us to realize that we are often in the process of being formed, or disciplined, against the way of Jesus.

b. Favoritism Fractures Us (James 2:1)

The Greek in James 2:1 is a little tough, and translations vary in how they render it. Here’s how the NRSV Updated Edition puts it:

*My brothers and sisters, do not claim the faith of
our Lord Jesus Christ of glory while showing partiality.*

- James 2:1 (NRSVUE) -

James is pointing out the inconsistency of naming Jesus as our Lord, without buying into the value system He’s taught us. He is drawing our attention to the inconsistency of claiming to trust in Jesus, and what He says, and still showing favouritism.

Favouritism fractures us. We’re trying to serve two masters – the master that demands we treat others with discrimination, and the master, Jesus, who calls us to love even our enemies.

c. Who’s Discipling You? (James 2:2-4)

A chunk of my professional life, outside of church land, has been in the sales world. The type of work I did required a lot of profiling. You sort companies into bigger fish and smaller fish, people into decision-makers and tire-kickers and gatekeepers. You’re making commission, time is money; and you need to know which people to spend time on.

Your employer would love for you to be formed into something. Your teachers would love for you to be formed into something. Your customers, your coworkers, your family and friends - there are paths, ways of being that are vying for your attention.

You are being disciplined by someone. James is calling us to make sure that someone is Jesus.

2. Turning up the Volume on Jesus (James 2:5-7)

⁵ *Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?*

⁶ *But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?*

⁷ *Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?*

- James 2:5-7 -

a. The Poor Deserve Honor (James 2:5-6a)

Notice that language – “...to inherit the kingdom...” (James 2:5b) – a direct callback to Jesus, when He said:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”

- Luke 6:20b -

For so many in the ancient world, and for many today, the dominant belief was that the poor and the enslaved found themselves in that condition because they somehow deserved it. In some cultures, reincarnation cycles have been a means of explaining why poor people are poor – they’re paying for some sin in a past life. For some in the west, poverty is simply seen as a byproduct of ‘stupidity’ or ‘laziness.’ Jesus, in contrast, intentionally distinguishes the poor.

b. A Note on Profiling

The TV show “Lie To Me”² is about a guy who’s supposed to be a human lie detector who notices little twinges in your face called “micro expressions” that supposedly happen when you’re trying to conceal an emotion. The show is based off the work of clinical psychologist Dr. Paul Ekman, who came up with this idea of micro-expressions and used his work to train FBI and TSA agents.³

² Lie to Me. (2009-2011). Fox Network.

³ Popular Mechanics. (30 Sept 2009). The (Real!) Science Behind Fox’s Lie to Me. <https://www.popularmechanics.com/culture/tv/a3960/4300722/>

Dr. Ekman’s ideas haven’t exactly held up to scrutiny;⁴ but there’s an appeal to profiling – getting to know deep, intimate things about another person without a solitary conversation. That’s kind of why stereotypes are a thing. We are drawn to behaviour that dehumanizes others – it takes work, time and generosity to genuinely get to know people.

The sort of work, time and generosity that Jesus brought to His interactions with outcasts. In a certain sense, to honour someone, to love them well, is to know their story.

c. Rich Does Not Equal Good (James 2:6b-7)

James then reminds his audience that wealth and morality, as many of them have personally experienced, do not often go hand in hand. Many in this community have been personally exploited by wealthy people, and for some, the poverty they experience is a direct result of litigation from the upper crust of society.

This isn’t James trying to demonize all wealthy people; but he is trying to restore a bit of sanity. Rich does not equal good. Certainly not in all cases, but for many of the upper crust of society, both then and now, success is built on a pile of ‘expendable’ people. It’s worth remembering that there is such a thing as unjust wealth.

3. The Royal Law (James 2:8-13)

⁸ *If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.*

⁹ *But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.*

¹⁰ *For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*

¹¹ *For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.*

¹² *Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,*

¹³ *because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

- James 2:8-13 -

⁴ Gelitz, Christiane. (09 Feb 2021). Humans Are Pretty Lousy Lie Detectors. Scientific American. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/humans-are-pretty-lousy-lie-detectors/>

a. Does Jesus Ask Us to Rank Our Love for Others? (James 2:8-9)

Kat Armas in, “*JD Vance is wrong: Jesus doesn’t ask us to rank our love for others*”⁵ is addressing an interview where Vice President JD Vance was defending recent decisions to cut American foreign aid. Vice President JD Vance, referencing a medieval Catholic idea called *ordo amoris* (order of loves), made the following statement:

There is a Christian concept that you love your family and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens, and then after that, prioritize the rest of the world. A lot of the far left has completely inverted that.⁶

Check out this video out this video for a good discussion on what Vance gets right and wrong: <https://youtu.be/AXulidBIDMk?si=4QmRWWvVR1a1Ls2M>

In her article, Armas offers what I think is a helpful response to Vance’s statement: “We struggle to fathom a love that is not ranked, that does not sort people into categories of worthiness. But Jesus seemed to be inviting us into **a different world altogether** — one where love moves freely and without hierarchy, breaking down the borders we’ve been taught to build.”⁷

b. “Who is My Neighbour?” (Luke 10:25-37)

That’s why James reminds us to keep what he calls ‘the Royal law’ – love your neighbour as yourself. James makes is abundantly clear - exercising favoritism is a direct breach of this command.

It reminds me of the response Jesus gives when He’s asked, by someone who wants to ‘justify’ their own narrow beliefs and practices, to clarify what exactly ‘loving one’s neighbour’ means; and He tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Check it out in Luke 10:25-37.

That, says Jesus, is what loving your neighbour looks like. No concern for who’s on what team. The Samaritan, the total outsider, has put the community of the faithful to shame by following the God of Israel better than the religious leaders.

⁵ Armas, Kat. (01 Feb 2025). JD Vance is wrong: Jesus doesn’t ask us to rank our love for others. National Catholic Reporter. <https://www.ncronline.org/opinion/guest-voices/jd-vance-wrong-jesus-doesnt-ask-us-rank-our-love-others>

⁶ Armas, *supra*.

⁷ Armas, *supra*.

In Matthew 5, Jesus tells us to love even our enemies. To resemble our Heavenly Father who sends rain to the just and the unjust. So, when James says, “...*love your neighbour as yourself...*” (James 2:8), it’s a command that Jesus has actually defined pretty well - Love without discrimination.

c. Showing Contempt for the Royal Law (James 2:10-11)

As James points out, followers of Jesus don’t get to reinvent the definitions given to us by Jesus. James uses this example that feels a bit far fetched:

Like: it’s against the Jewish law to commit adultery. So, you’re faithful to your spouse. Good job. It’s also against the law to commit murder, and when you kill a person, you don’t get to use the, ‘but I’ve been a faithful husband, line as a defense. It’s silly.

For James, loving your neighbour while showing favouritism is that ridiculous. It’s fractured living. Trying to be disciplined in two directions at once - it fractures us.

Conclusion: Painting Over a Stained World (James 2:12-13)

I love the simplicity of the statement that wraps this section up:

“Mercy triumphs over judgment.” - James 2:13 -

It’s the way the world works when God is king. Mercilessness is the way of a world that is fading. A world that corrupts and brings death. Mercy is in the very heart of God. It’s how He describes Himself to Moses:

*⁶...The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God,
slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love
to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin...*

- Exodus 34:6a-7a -

When we live mercifully, our mercy triumphs over judgment. Instead of this world – with its discrimination and injustice – bleeding into our lives and shaping us. We have been called to let the kingdom of God bleed into our world.

Rather than being stained by a world that demands financial performance, that puts a number value on the very people who bear the image of God, what would it look like for the way of Jesus to ‘paint’ this world?

Life Group Discussion and Reflection

Group leaders: choose which questions you want to do based on group size and time.

Open Up

1. Have you ever had a funny or unexpected encounter with someone famous or powerful? What happened?
2. What's something you used to think was 'worldly' or 'off-limits' that now seems pretty harmless—or even fun?
3. What about the opposite? Something you thought was benign but have now come to see as 'disciplining you' away from the way of Jesus?

Dig In: Read James 1:27-2:13

1. What is a major point from this text that either encourages or challenges you? Why?
2. Can you think of a time when you felt unseen or overlooked—maybe in church, at work, or with friends? What was that like for you? Contrast that with a time when you felt seen and acknowledged. What was the difference?
3. Have you ever caught yourself treating someone differently based on their appearance, status, or wealth? What did that moment teach you? What would this text of James say to you in future moments?
4. In what ways do you notice the culture around you shaping your values—at work, at school, or even at church? Are there habits or patterns that you've had to unlearn as you learn to follow Jesus?
5. **Read Luke 10:25-37.** If Jesus were telling this story in 21st Century Canada, who would the characters be? What is a modern equivalent of the question 'who is my neighbour?'

Prayer:

Take some time to ask God to show you the different ways you are being shaped by something other than the path of Jesus.

Pray for each other, for strength to follow Jesus, even when it means going against the grain of our world. Pray that we would grow in our ability to love others without favoritism.