# James, Lesson #3 The Pressure of Partiality

## Good Questions Have Small Groups Talking [www.MyBibleStudyLessons.com](http://www.MyBibleStudyLessons.com)

You might email your group and ask them to read Lewis’ article on the Inner Ring.

## James 2

### OPEN

Let’s each share your name and who was the most popular kid in your high school?

### DIG

1. Today we will be discussing what the Bible says about favoritism. The negative of this is prejudice. Who are groups society sometimes shows prejudice toward? We think of race, and that is one right answer. What are some other groups?

Grant’s church was beginning a ministry to people suffering from AIDS. At the initial planning session, an expert on this type of ministry was going to be present to speak to the group about the Dos and Don’ts of such a task. The catch was that the person who was coming had AIDS.

As he drove to the meeting, Grant struggled with what his response would be. “How should I address this individual? Would I shake hands with this person? Would I sit next to him? Would I pry into his lifestyle, demanding to know how he contracted the disease? How would I react if he volunteered that information? Is this a ministry that I should be involved in personally?” These questions and countless others were swirling through his mind.

As he pondered these issues, he was reminded of James 2:1 and the fact that favoritism is sin. The issue is not whether the distinction is made over economic, social, educational, physical, spiritual, or health concerns or differences. The issue is that our motives for making the distinction are immediately called into question because favoritism is sin. — (From A Dad’s Blessing by Gary Smalley and John Trent) / Lucado, M. (1996). Life lessons from the inspired word of God: Book of James. Inspirational Bible Study Series (p. 36). Dallas, TX: Word Publishing.

1. Verse 2. What is the significance of the gold ring?

Airlines use seat size, red carpets, crockery, and entry order to reinforce status. In Rome, every conceivable aspect of life was used to reflect the race for honor.

Clothes were, literally, status symbols. If you were not a slave, you could wear what was called a “freedman’s cap.” That showed at least you were not on the bottom rung.

A male citizen from the age of about fourteen was allowed to wear the toga virilis, the garment of manhood. Ironically, the toga was “a remarkably incommodious garment.” Drafty in winter, sticky hot in summer, keeping one hand covered and unusable, difficult to arrange (the rich employed slaves specially trained in toga-draping), it had only one value: the proclamation of status.

A senator could wear a purple stripe on his toga, purple being associated with nobility. An equestrian couldn’t wear the stripe, but was allowed to wear both an expensive toga and gold rings. The equestrian class was sometimes called, “The Order of the Rings.” During those days James the brother of Jesus warned believers not to favor a visitor “wearing a gold ring and fine clothes” over a shabbily dressed man. Jesus was giving the same worth to slaves as to equestrians. Jocks and nerds would begin eating at the same table. — Ortberg, J. (2012). Who is this man? The unpredictable impact of the inescapable Jesus. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

1. What are some ways our society distinguishes between classes of people?

Imagine living in a world obsessed with status. (It may not require all that much effort.)

The Roman Empire organized its occupants the way most airlines organize their customers, the most basic distinction being “first class” and “coach.” Airlines work hard to reinforce this distinction: First-class passengers get to board first; they get to walk through a separate gate featuring a glorious red carpet upon which the rest of us may not tread; they sit nearest the front; they eat on fine china and drink free wine. Airlines basically try to re-create middle school society: a small clique of the privileged few envied by everyone on the outside.

Roman society was roughly divided between first class (maybe 2 percent of the population) and coach—those whom Tacitus called “the rabble.” The rabble served an important purpose; as one ancient writer put it, “… the existence of inferiors is an advantage to superiors since they will be able to point out those over whom they are superior.”

But there are further subdivisions. Airlines have 100K club members: Executive Premiers, Gold premiers, Silver premiers, Straw premiers, Just Barely premiers, and so on down to people who have no “status” at all. No matter what status category you are in, there is always one above you. The goal is to accumulate enough points to achieve the next-highest status.

In Rome, the highest flyers were the six hundred or so senators who ran things under Caesar. Under them came the equestrians—originally a class wealthy enough to own horses for military affairs (the idea being that a mode of transportation could be a status symbol). Then were the decurians—wealthy citizens who occupied government offices and priesthoods.

These were the Romans who flew first class. They walked the red carpet. They each had a series of honors within their own class that they would vie for. This was called the cursus honorum—the “race for honors.” Running this race defined life. Winning was heroic.

Underneath these elite Romans were the other 98 percent of people who flew coach. They were the “nobodies” — a personis mediocribus, for whom greatness was out of the question. But they too had their own set of status categories.

Some of the “nobodies” were citizens of the empire, which meant they enjoyed certain legal protections and rights. Others were freedmen who did not have the rights of citizens but had personal liberty. At the bottom of the pecking order were slaves. Conditions of slaves varied widely, but they had no rights, and they lived at the mercy of the paterfamilias, the head of the household they served.

Even nonelite categories would create voluntary associations and clubs where they could imitate the status-seeking of the elite. The president of the chess club may not win girls the way the quarterback of the football team would, but being alpha dog of the chess club is better than not being alpha at all. — Ortberg, J. (2012). Who is this man? The unpredictable impact of the inescapable Jesus. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

1. What about in church world—what are some ways we separate people into groups of the in crowd and the outsiders?

Through most of my Christian life, I’ve wrestled against a form of Christianity obsessed with externals. Almost as if they had completely forgotten that “man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7), too many believers draw quick conclusions about people based merely on what they first see or hear.

• Her hair is too short.

• He shouldn’t wear that to church.

• What’s with those tattoos?

• That car is too expensive.

• Their house is too big.

• Why did she wear that to church?

• He has a PhD.

• She didn’t even graduate from high school.

• They go to public school.

• They’re homeschoolers.

— Swindoll, C. R. (2010). Insights on James and 1 & 2 Peter. Swindoll’s New Testament Commentary (p. 50). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

1. C.S Lewis has an article on the inner ring. When you were in High School, who was in the inner ring?

There are no formal admissions or expulsions. People think they are in it after they have in fact been pushed out of it, or before they have been allowed in: this provides great amusement for those who are really inside. It has no fixed name. The only certain rule is that the insiders and outsiders call it by different names. From inside it may be designated, in simple cases, by mere enumeration: it may be called “You and Tony and me.” When it is very secure and comparatively stable in membership it calls itself “we.” When it has to be expanded to meet a particular emergency it calls itself “all the sensible people at this place.” From outside, if you have dispaired of getting into it, you call it “That gang” or “they” or “So-and-so and his set” or “The Caucus” or “The Inner Ring.” If you are a candidate for admission you probably don’t call it anything. To discuss it with the other outsiders would make you feel outside yourself. And to mention talking to the man who is inside, and who may help you if this present conversation goes well, would be madness.

Badly as I may have described it, I hope you will all have recognised the thing I am describing. Not, of course, that you have been in the Russian Army, or perhaps in any army. But you have met the phenomenon of an Inner Ring. You discovered one in your house at school before the end of the first term. And when you had climbed up to somewhere near it by the end of your second year, perhaps you discovered that within the ring there was a Ring yet more inner, which in its turn was the fringe of the great school Ring to which the house Rings were only satellites. It is even possible that the school ring was almost in touch with a Masters’ Ring. You were beginning, in fact, to pierce through the skins of an onion. And here, too, at your University—shall I be wrong in assuming that at this very moment, invisible to me, there are several rings—independent systems or concentric rings—present in this room? And I can assure you that in whatever hospital, inn of court, diocese, school, business, or college you arrive after going down, you will find the Rings—what Tolstoy calls the second or unwritten systems. <http://www.lewissociety.org/innerring.php>

1. Why do you humans create the inner ring?

My main purpose in this address is simply to convince you that this desire is one of the great permanent mainsprings of human action. It is one of the factors which go to make up the world as we know it—this whole pell-mell of struggle, competition, confusion, graft, disappointment and advertisement, and if it is one of the permanent mainsprings then you may be quite sure of this. Unless you take measures to prevent it, this desire is going to be one of the chief motives of your life, from the first day on which you enter your profession until the day when you are too old to care. That will be the natural thing—the life that will come to you of its own accord. Any other kind of life, if you lead it, will be the result of conscious and continuous effort. If you do nothing about it, if you drift with the stream, you will in fact be an “inner ringer.” I don’t say you’ll be a successful one; that’s as may be. But whether by pining and moping outside Rings that you can never enter, or by passing triumphantly further and further in—one way or the other you will be that kind of man. <http://www.lewissociety.org/innerring.php>

1. Why does this matter? Is the inner ring a bad thing?

Of all the passions, the passion for the Inner Ring is most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things. <http://www.lewissociety.org/innerring.php>

1. Imagine you were casting these two people in a movie. Who would you choose for the actor of the rich one and who for the poor one?

Somewhere, some time, church is about to begin. All the usual faces of our Christian brothers and sisters and their children are there. Suddenly two unfamiliar profiles darken the door. The first is regal, to say the least! His hands are, as we say in Greek, chrusodaktulios—that is, “gold fingered.” Some of his fingers even have more than two rings, and that big Rolex is not just any Rolex! This chic display is of Roman origin and is the culture’s way of indicating one’s wealth. I have been told that in Rome they have shops where rings can be rented for special occasions. The Roman philosopher Seneca has written, “we adorn our fingers with rings; a gem is fitted to every joint.”2 This visitor, though a Jew, clearly likes the Roman custom and is obviously into “big bucks!” And his clothing is something else! It is lampra—”bright” or “shining.” He is decked out totally in white, as our wealthy countrymen like to do. The man almost glows! (Cf. Acts 10:30.) How great he looks with his Caribbean tan and the white linen Gatsbyesque suit and the panama. We are impressed!

Oh yes … the other man’s robe is rhupara—shabby. It apparently is the only thing he has to wear because it is so tattered and grimy. But frankly, no one really notices him because all eyes are fixed on the dazzle of the first visitor. — Hughes, R. K. (1991). James: faith that works. Preaching the Word (p. 87). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

1. Do you think they would actually asked people to sit on the floor?

One of the brothers rises quickly to his feet and, nodding deferentially to the rich man, says, “Here’s a good seat for you.” As the man settles himself, the brother brusquely gestures to the shabby visitor, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet.” Soon the worship service begins—or does it?

How could any group which calls itself “Christian” do such a thing? Yet well-respected scholars such as Ralph Martin say that the language of verses 2 and 3, as well as the context, indicates an actual happening in the early church. James probably witnessed this tragic event himself. But even if the event were hypothetical, subsequent church history has documented that this sin repeats itself in the church. We do not even have to look back to the so-called Dark Ages to find it. Because the eighteenth-century Church of England had become so elitist and inhospitable to the common man, in 1739 John Wesley had to take to graveyards and fields to preach the gospel. And thus we have poignant accounts of his preaching to 30,000 coal miners at dawn in the fields, and the resulting saving power of the gospel evidenced by tears streaming white trails down their coal-darkened faces. Wesley was no schismatic, but because there was no room in the established church for common people, he reluctantly founded the Methodist-Episcopal Church. — Hughes, R. K. (1991). James: faith that works. Preaching the Word (pp. 87–88). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

1. What is the most outrageous expression of prejudice you have personally witnessed?



1. Ever seen the opposite—a remarkable example of someone breaking with prejudice to act like a real Christian?

When I was stationed on the island of Okinawa, our general liked to sit down in front during chapel services. There was always a place reserved for him and his entourage of aides and all those guys that waited on him hand and foot. He usually arrived about five minutes after the worship started and you could hear them all marching in step and sitting down in that one spot everybody knew belonged to them.

We had a fine Christian chaplain, a real maverick, a strong preacher, and a courageous fellow. He was one of the only chaplains I knew who was genuinely born again. One Easter Sunday morning the chapel was packed. Guys outside couldn’t get a seat. The chaplain wanted to make as much room as possible for all the troops, so he packed them in wherever he found space. He told the ushers, “Bring ‘em down.” And guess who sat in the general’s seat? A private. Now, in the Marine Corps, trust me, no one else sits where generals are supposed to sit … especially buck privates!

But this Easter Sunday, one did.

Then in came the general. He surveyed the chapel and saw no place available. The general obviously didn’t like it, because in less than three months, our fine chaplain got shipped off the island. The chaplain paid a big price for a valuable virtue. He refused to show partiality, even if it meant seating an on-time private over a tardy general.

But God works in mysterious ways. I found out months later that our chaplain who got booted off Okinawa wound up being stationed on Hawaii. How good is that! —Swindoll, C. R. (2010). Insights on James and 1 & 2 Peter. Swindoll’s New Testament Commentary (p. 54). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

1. Have you ever felt like an outsider? What did that feel like? Who has a story?

Watching Cher, Holt saw that it wasn’t just about just singing. Cher spent years on tour, made many sacrifices, and said she often felt isolated and alone. Criticism from others, Cher said, was sometimes too much to bear.

“You have no idea how crushed I get,” Cher said. “It’s not like I don’t care and I come back. It’s like I am crushed and crushed and crushed. And I still come back.”

For her entire life, she said, she always felt like an outsider.

“I’m not exactly an actress. And I’m kind of a singer. And I’m a performer, but I have been to Vegas. I just fall into this kind of strange subgroup of my own,” she said. <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/entertainment/2013/05/cher-always-felt-like-an-outsider-tells-story-of-her-unconventional-mom/>

1. Verse 17. How important is this issue? Is this a heaven or hell issue?

Another place where the tension is been hotly debated is over the issue of faith and works. If you are, as I am, on the protestant/ evangelical side of things, you are probably uncomfortable with this statement:

Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

We read a statement like that and it sounds vaguely familiar so we don’t want to reject it outright, but we sure want to say, “Yeah, but. . .” We don’t embrace it in the same way we embrace the verse that says, “not by works, so that no one can boast.” We have not memorized James 2:17 as we have memorized Ephesians 2.9. We are out of balance. We have lost the narrow way. When we read Ephesians 2.9 we pound the pulpit and raise our voices. When we read James 2.17, we mumble.

We need to get comfortable with the fact that there is no salvation without works. That kind of faith–the works-free kind does not save. Works don’t save, but there is no salvation without them. Do you feel the tension? That is the narrow way. “You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.” James 2:22 [NIV]

Jesus taught that “by their fruits you will know them.” (Matthew 7.16) Some have preached a gospel that suggests you can live like the devil and end up with the angels as long as you do this transaction called being saved. The Bible does not teach that. But, it is not about behaving our way into heaven, either. It is about walking the narrow way. — Josh Hunt. (2008). Good Questions Have Groups Talking.

1. Read over James 2.14 – 26 silently. What role do works have in our salvation?

Not all faith is redemptive. James 2:14–16 says faith without works is dead and cannot save. James describes spurious faith as pure hypocrisy (v. 16), mere cognitive assent (v. 19), devoid of any verifying works (vv. 17–18)—no different from the demons’ belief (v. 19). Obviously there is more to saving faith than merely conceding a set of facts. Faith without works is useless (v. 20).

Yet some in contemporary evangelicalism refuse to allow for any kind of relationship between faith and works. With this limitation, they are forced to receive virtually any profession of faith as the real thing. At least one writer explicitly stated that dead faith can save. Amazingly, one popular interpretation of James 2 teaches that dead faith is actually proof of salvation.

Others admit the inefficacy of “faith” that is no more than a barren, academic recognition of the truth, but balk at defining faith in terms that imply submission or commitment of one’s life. In fact, it is commonly believed that faith and commitment are innately disconnected.7 The typical idea of faith relegates it to a momentary act that takes place in the mind, a decision to believe the facts of the gospel—”nothing more than a response to a divine initiative.”

Herein lies the fallacy of today’s popular approach to evangelism. The gospel appeal is tacked on to a wholly inadequate explanation of what it means to believe. The modern definition of faith eliminates repentance, erases the moral significance of believing, obviates the work of God in the sinner’s heart, and makes an ongoing trust in the Lord optional. Far from championing the truth that human works have no place in salvation, modern easy-believism has made faith itself a wholly human work, a fragile, temporary attribute that may or may not endure. — MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2000). The Gospel according to Jesus: what does Jesus mean when he says “follow me” (Electronic ed.). Grand Rapids, MI: Academic and Professional Books, Zondervan Pub. House.

1. Verse 19. Why is believing in God not enough?

Theological beliefs—are yours active or dead? A USA Today/CNN Gallup Poll was disclosed in December of 1994 with some interesting research on what Americans say they believe. Of those polled, 90% believe in heaven. Only 73% think there is an opposite of heaven, even though the word for that fiery place is probably part of their daily vocabulary. Believers in angels number 72%. But less than 65% are convinced that the devil cannot make you do anything. While there is an increase in the past decade, of those who believe in theological absolutes, more folks also believe in reincarnation and psychic contact with the dead. Today there is more openness about what people believe. Yet those beliefs will not necessarily secure for them a place in heaven. The Bible says, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19 NIV) There must be some evidence that your beliefs have transformed your life to the point that righteous actions are visible. God inspired this warning: “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17 NIV). Remember: Upgrade your “B”eliefs into “A”ctions. Reflections — AMG Bible Illustrations. (2000).Bible Illustrations Series. Chattanooga: AMG Publishers.

1. Are works required for us to be saved?

This is the point James is making in his hard-to-understand passage on faith and works (James 2:14-26). He is simply telling us that a “faith” that does not result in works—in a holy life, in other words—is not a living faith but a dead one, no better than that which the demons possess.

God’s nature demands holiness in the life of a Christian. When He calls us to salvation, He calls us to fellowship with Himself and His Son Jesus Christ (I John 1:3). But God is light; in Him is no darkness at all (I John 1:5). How then can we have fellowship with Him if we continue to walk in darkness?

Holiness then is required for fellowship with God. David asked the question, “Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?” (Psalm 15:1). That is to say, “Lord, who may live in fellowship with You?” The answer given in the next four verses may be summarized as “he who leads a holy life.” — The Pursuit of Holiness. Jerry Bridges

1. Is this saying we are saved by works?

The works of a professing Christian are of great importance. They cannot save your soul. They cannot justify you. They cannot wipe out your sins. They cannot deliver you from the wrath of God. But it does not follow because they cannot save you, that they are of no importance. Take heed and beware of such a notion. The man who thinks so is fearfully deceived.

I often think I could willingly die for the doctrine of justification by faith without the deeds of the law. But I must earnestly contend, as a general principle, that a man’s works are the evidence of a man’s religion. If you call yourself a Christian, you must show it in your daily ways and daily behavior. Call to mind that the faith of Abraham and of Rahab was proved by their works (James 2:21–25). Remember it avails you and me nothing to profess we know God, if in works we deny Him (Titus 1:16). Remember the words of the Lord Jesus: ‘Every tree is known by its own fruit’ (Luke 6:44). — Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots.

1. How would you explain the relationship between faith and works?

An old ferryman, a man of much thought and observation, but of few words, a reader of the Bible and a firm believer in its truths, had among his regular passengers two business men, who crossed together on the same day once a week. Their conversation often turned to this matter of faith and works, one of them thinking he could do without works if he had faith, and the other thinking he could do without faith if he had works. The ferryman’s patience was so tried by the frequent and fruitless repetition of “faith” and “works,” used as they were in a sense so different from their import and so destructive of their Scriptural harmony, that at last he felt that he must intervene. He said nothing, but fell upon the following expedient. On one of his oars he painted the word “Faith,” and on the other “Works.” When on his next passage across with the two friendly disputants, he reached the most dangerous part, he took in “Faith,” and with all his might plied “Works.” The boat went round and round, to the annoyance and fear of the two passengers. “Put out the other oar,” called one of them in a loud and angry voice.”Very well,” was the old man’s calm reply, as he took in “Works” and put out “Faith,” which he used as he had formerly used the other. Of course this produced the same result, and the two men thought he must be out of his mind. The old man, however, continued his practical demonstration for a little, and then called their attention to the names painted on the oars. “I have tried your way,” said he, “and yours; and you have seen the result. Now, observe my way.” And as he gave a steady pull to each oar the boat at once acknowledged in its forward course the power of their harmonious strokes, and in a few minutes was at the land-place. “Thus it is,” he added, “that faith worketh by love.” So faith without works, or works without faith, will not suffice to bring us unto our desired haven. But let there be both, and the haven will be safely reached. — Handfuls on Purpose.

1. What do you want to recall from today’s conversation?
2. How can we support one another in prayer this week?

After a few weeks or at an appropriate time, the leader may ask the group what their experiences have been in prayer, especially group prayer. This may also be a good time to talk about questions or frustrations with prayer. You could use the Bible study in the previous sidebar to get people thinking about prayer. Then follow up by asking the group why Christians pray together and sometimes out loud. You may want to add some of the following insights.

Praying together brings unity and encouragement, increasing our faith. Praying together may have given the early Christians the courage in their Acts 4 prayer. When we hear others pray, we also learn about prayer. For example, Amy discovered new ways of praying by watching other group members—Rick’s casualness in praying showed her that she could talk to God as a friend, and Elizabeth’s habit of including Scripture when she prayed inspired Amy to do the same.

Praying out loud builds our relationships and community. For example, one night after discussing the passage in John 8 where a woman is caught in adultery, Keisha asked her group about ways they condemn people like the religious leaders condemned the woman in the passage. Amy told about some judgmental feelings toward her family. Hearing Rick, a young prayer himself, bring her need before God encouraged and touched Amy and deepened her friendship with Rick as well. — Beyerlein, A. (1995). Adoring God: Worship & Prayer. Small Group Leaders’ Handbook: The Next Generation. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.