

STUDY 3

FAITH WORKS: FOR THE RICH & POOR

JAMES 2:1-13

In chapter 1 James asked his readers to turn their way of looking at the world upside down. He wanted them to see that the trials they were facing were actually good for them, in light of their faith in the gospel. This week's passage asks them to turn their world upside down in another way. This time, it's about how they think of other people...



FAVOURITISM IN THE CHURCH

Read James 2:1-7

1. According to verse 1, what kind of belief rules out favouritism? Any ideas why?
2. What is it about the type of favouritism on display here that makes people “judges with evil thoughts”?
3. What effect does James say this behaviour had? (v6)

Luke 6:20-21, 24

Looking at his disciples, [Jesus] said:

²⁰ “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.... ²⁴ “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.”

4. How does James “reframe” the thinking of his readers on material riches and their desirability? How does this develop the theme James started in 1:9-11?

James is saying that Christians should have an upside down view of what constitutes true blessing. Once Jesus displayed the possibility of glory coming through suffering, victory out of humiliation, he gave us a whole new way of looking at the world.

MISPLACED ZEAL

As the head of the church in Jerusalem, James was constantly dealing with “thousands of Jews who have believed but who were still zealous for the law,” and wanted to insist Gentile believers took on the whole law too. (See Acts 21:17-22 to see how serious this became!) In this case, "the law" means the instructions God gave to Israel in the Old Testament scriptures, which Jesus reduced to ‘Loving God and loving your neighbour.’ But with all their zeal for the details of the law, they’re missing the essence.

Read James 2:8-13

5. Some people seemed to be using the law to justify themselves. What is James' response to this?

6. Having shown the problem with using the Old Testament law to justify themselves, James reminds his readers of the new dynamic that's at play in the ‘law that gives freedom’ (i.e. the gospel). What is this new dynamic and how should it be playing out in the lives of his readers? (v12-13)

James started his argument against favouritism to the rich by appealing to their common belief in Jesus Christ. He ends it by reminding them that the consequences for failing to live Jesus' lifestyle of mercy and compassion is that you won't be shown mercy yourself.

Murder

At this time it was common for the rich to protect their financial interests fiercely - with violence, if necessary. This included sending violent debt collectors if the indebted party refused to pay up. So where the rich were concerned, “If you murder” wasn't just hypothetical. It was standard business practice. So why are they honouring the rich?

Mercy

The Greek word *ελεος* (translated here as ‘mercy’) doesn't only mean not giving someone the legal sentence they deserve. It also covers the territory of compassion or pity. So it encompasses the whole attitude where seeing someone's fate moves you to act kindly towards them.

FAITH WORKS FOR RICH & POOR

7. What type of people do you tend to gravitate towards, when appearances are all you have to go on?

Luke 14:12-14

Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

8. What external markers are likely to make you avoid someone?

Mercy, compassion and kindness are the ways that our God has acted towards us lowly humans in the gospel. Despite us having nothing ourselves that he needs or would benefit him.

9. How can we reignite our compassion towards people we won't benefit from?

10. Plan out some specific actions that you personally or as a group might take towards people who can't give anything back.

It's faith in the merciful Lord Jesus - who looked down on us with compassion despite our rejection of him - that drives us to have compassion on those who are less gifted than ourselves, as the world understands giftedness.

Pray that we would be able to see people through God's eyes, showing mercy to those who have nothing to give us in return, because we know that is how God has loved us. Spend some time praying that Christians would never forget who they serve and the standard by which they will be judged. Pray that Jesus' mercy and compassion to us would be our model.