



03

SESSION THREE

The Gospel Calls for Mercy

SESSION SUMMARY

God has called us to a life of holiness—to be a people set apart for the glory of God. However, we were not saved to separate and settle around those we are most comfortable with. We are to be set apart through our Christ-like character, our mission-minded actions, and our Biblical beliefs—all of which should drive us toward those who need Christ, regardless of their skin color, economic status, or political beliefs. Our individual lives are meant to be satellites of God’s glory to all people, reflecting the hope of the gospel and the message of mercy we ourselves have experienced.

SCRIPTURE

James 2:1-13

THE POINT

God calls us to avoid showing favoritism and to extend mercy to all.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

As we begin our study today, take a few minutes to read through Psalm 96. During your first read, underline all the commands given. Now, read the passage again and this time circle every mention of the global nature of these commands (i.e., “the whole earth,” “all peoples,” and “the nations”).

This globe in its current state—whether we live in Kentucky or Kuwait—is not really our home. Christians have been rescued and given a new identity, which includes a new, heavenly citizenship. We must shake off the tendency to sit within the safety of what we know and who we think we can trust. Our political stances and our cultural identities don’t mean much in light of eternity. We exist to give glory to Christ through bringing the gospel to all nations. We must be willing to cross social, political, cultural, and national lines to bring the freedom of Christ to every soul in bondage to sin and death.

- **How does your heart for the nations line up with God's love for all people?**

Option 2

Ask students to list some of their favorite foods, TV shows, bands and musicians, actors, movies, books, and so on. Ask:

- **What makes these your favorites? Why?**

Give each student a blank piece of paper. Tell students to list their three best friends. Next, instruct students to list the names of three people they don’t know well. Allow a few minutes for students to think through and record their answers. Then ask:

- **Which of these groups would you be more likely to reach out to if they showed up to church? Why?**

After discussing students’ answers, brainstorm some ways they can avoid showing favoritism. Believers must love, reach out to, help, pray for, and share Jesus with all kinds of people—no matter how well we know them or how little we think their status may benefit us.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God calls us to avoid showing favoritism and to extend mercy to all.

CHARACTERS

- **James:** half brother of Jesus; leader of the church in Jerusalem

PLOT

The half-brother of Jesus, the apostle James, opens our eyes to the fact that favoritism has no place among the people of God. In a culture very much like our own, the people of James' day faced the temptation to favor one group of people over another. However, James knew that such behavior was the very opposite of living out the gospel and of doing what the Word of God tells us.

SHOWING MERCY
*Those who know mercy
 show mercy to others.*

A NEW IDENTITY
*Peter reminds God's
 people of their identity
 in Christ.*

**Bonus Session*
**THE RESURRECTION
 IS ESSENTIAL**
*Christianity stands or falls
 with the resurrection.*

JAMES WARNED AGAINST FAVORITISM

The first chapter of James ends with a call for Christians to keep ourselves unstained from the world. We are to be holy—which essentially means we are to be different. James carries that theme into chapter 2 by addressing one of the ways we often struggle with this—favoritism.

- **When have you struggled with showing favoritism among your friends, classmates, or siblings? Explain.** (*p. 22, PSG*)

¹ My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ² For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³ and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” ⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (Jas. 2:1-4)

So, we must “hold on to” our faith (our confession as Christ as our glorious Lord) in such a way that this confession is evident to those around us. Our beliefs must be consistent with our actions. Since James received reports of the church acting inconsistent with the faith they claimed to hold, he offered a parable of sorts to drive his point home.

James asked the readers to imagine a wealthy man entered their gathering and was followed by a poor man. How would they react to each? Would they offer the wealthy man a seat of honor while telling the poor man to stand or to sit on the floor? If so, they discriminated by believing the wealthy man was deserving of more honor than the poor man. Through those actions, they revealed their evil thoughts of favoring the wealthy man. The readers in James’ day probably had to take a big gulp when they read this knowing they were guilty. And so do we—we are just as vulnerable to the sin of favoritism.

The proof of our salvation to the world around us is in the way we live. A Christian showing favoritism (which includes any sort of partiality shown regarding race, economic status, political view, or other defining characteristic of a person) ought to be an oxymoron. A Christ-follower should not treat people differently depending on their appearances, because it is inconsistent with the character of the God we serve and testify about. The Bible tells us plainly that God shows no partiality (Rom. 2:11). As image bearers of God—salt and light to the world around us—our treatment of others should never be dependent on how people look, what they do or don’t believe, or what they can or can’t do for us.

GOD'S KINGDOM IS NOT LIKE THE WORLD'S KINGDOM

As James continued addressing the sin of favoritism, he wanted to be sure that the church fully understood what they were doing when they sided with the rich over the poor—or demonstrated favoritism for any other reason. He wrote:

⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? (Jas. 2:5-7)

Favoritism is not just evil because it is self-serving; it is far more sinister than that. Favoritism undermines the gospel itself. James reminded the church that God chose the poor of the world to be rich in faith (Psa. 68:10; Matt. 5:3). Through our neediness—financial, spiritual, and otherwise—we turn to seek help from others. And in that helpless state, the gospel takes root in the heart and begins to grow, and we begin to experience God's extravagant grace in our lives.

Still, it goes even deeper than that. James pointed out that when his readers favored the wealthy and neglected the poor, they took sides and aligned themselves with the ones who oppress others—including themselves! The rich were rich, in part, through their oppression of the poor. The poor were poor, in part, because of the oppression of the wealthy. When the people of God choose to align with oppressors through mistreating others in an attempt to gain favor, it shows that the church's thinking has not been transformed by the gospel as it should be. In these cases, the church still acts like the world, but the gospel is intended to change our perspective completely. God turns everything upside down.

Yet God's calling is upside down from what this world values, esteems, and applauds. As we follow God with an eternal perspective, our goals, desires, and choices will (and should) look radically different from those who don't know Christ. The world will always demand our allegiance to the whims and trends of the time. Sometimes our Christian values and convictions will line up with the world order; Oftentimes, it will not. We must continually remember that this present world is not our home. We do not exist to be served, but to serve. Our lives are not our own, but are a sacrifice, an offering to our God.

- **How do your goals, desires, and choices reflect God's will for your life rather than the world's?** (*p. 23, PSG*)

MERCY TRIUMPHS OVER JUDGMENT

It is easy to be judgmental of others when we don't have the perspective of new identity in Christ. But just as God is merciful, we should also be. James continues:

⁸ If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. (Jas. 2:8-13)

James didn't sugar-coat it: Favoritism is sin. Not only is being judgmental and showing partiality against the heart of God, these actions are hypocritical at their core. We each were rescued at our worst. We had nothing to offer Christ, yet He bore the wrath of God so we could be included in the family of God (1 Pet. 2:9-10). We were homeless, fatherless orphans without hope. But God rescued us from our poverty and granted us the riches of His eternal kingdom and the position of His beloved children. All we have is from God alone.

We are called to show mercy not only for what we have already experienced in Christ and who we have become, but also because of what we will experience. We are to show mercy because we will receive mercy. Here is a sobering thought: All of our words and actions will be judged one day (Matt. 12:36-37; Rom. 2:6-11; 2 Cor. 5:10). On that day we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ to account for all of it—every word and deed, no matter how big or how small. James carefully pointed out that we are all lawbreakers and have been convicted as sinners, proven by our favoritism (2:9-11).

But we know what will happen on that day: Because of Christ, all of our sin will be tossed aside and we will stand before God pure and righteous. We will experience mercy from God. It is this great hope that should compel us to extend mercy to others freely and abundantly. Mercy triumphs over our judgment, so we are to turn away from being judgmental toward others and give them mercy.

- **When you find it difficult to extend mercy to others, what can you do to respond in grace rather than judgment?** (p. 24, PSG)

TIMELINE

LOVE IN ACTION

Love for God and others is the fruit of Christian living.

LETTERS TO YOUNG PASTORS

Paul instructs Timothy and Titus.

CO-HEIRS WITH CHRIST

Benefits of being adopted through Christ

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God Is Just (p. 24, PSG)

God establishes standards for His moral creatures that are in accordance with His righteousness, and they will be judged according to those righteous standards (Lev. 11:44-45; Rom. 2:5-11; 2 Cor. 5:10). It would be an injustice if God did not uphold His righteousness, because such a failure would require God to violate His own righteous character. Since humanity has sinned by failing to live up to God's righteous standards, God has taken it upon Himself to make provision by being both just and the justifier of those who place their faith in Christ (Rom. 3:25-26).

CHRIST CONNECTION

When the early church was showing favoritism, James reminded believers of their identity in light of God's mercy and judgment. The way we show our faith in Jesus Christ is by keeping the royal law and proclaiming His mercy over judgment—a mercy seen most clearly in Jesus' death in our place. Because God has shown mercy to us through Jesus Christ, we are to show mercy to others.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **In what ways do you think people around you can see Christ in their interactions with you?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How do we sometimes side with the world and act and think according to its values instead of the gospel?** *Answers might include: We judge people based on their outward appearance; We measure others' worth and value by what they are capable of doing; We dismiss those who don't agree with us; and so on.*
- **Share about a time when you or someone you know made a decision marked with an eternal perspective which seemed like foolishness to the world.** *Answers will vary.*
- **How has this session challenged you when it comes to not being judgmental or showing favoritism to others?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

God's kingdom will be filled with every tribe, tongue, and nation. Heaven will not be brimming with a bunch of people who look, speak, and act just like you. The sounds of our eternal home will be permeated with beautiful, joyous voices of diversity. What better place to get ready for that glorious day than in our churches now?

- **What are some ways your church values and advocates for diversity?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is it important for Christians not to remain silent when it comes to fighting for diversity?** *Our actions and words are a direct result of our beliefs and convictions. If we really believe God desires and loves diversity, as the Bible clearly describes, then we should be vocal about seeing diversity displayed in all of our churches.*



HEART

If we consistently live without mercy for those in desperate need of it, we need to take a big step back and evaluate our hearts. Have our hearts undergone the radical change we say they have? Never ending mercy, unfailing love, and deep compassion are characteristics of our God. As sons and daughters of God, our experience of grace-filled belonging and merciful rescue should shape our lives and reflect the glory of God to everyone around us.

- **Why can it be so difficult to treat others with mercy sometimes?** *Often, we feel like we have been wronged and therefore find it difficult to show mercy, or we feel as if the other person isn't deserving of mercy, and so on.*
- **Read the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35. What does this teach us about our need to show mercy to others?** *In short, it teaches us that we are all debtors to God, and if He can find room to show us mercy, then we should find room to show it to others.*



HANDS

Partiality and being judgmental should be eradicated from the life of a Christian. Yet favoritism, racism, sexism, socio-economic and cultural elitism and a host of other "isms" continue to plague the church. Our merciful treatment of people—especially those who are different from us—ought to be one of the greatest and truest markers of believers. We are to be known for our mercy, compassion, and care for the wounded, afflicted, outcast, and marginalized. When it comes down to it, we might find that we have more in common with these people than we realized. We are all in need of a Savior. We are all in need of rescue. We all are in need of mercy and grace.

- **What "isms" do you see in your life and how does God's mercy to you address each one?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How are you actively seeking to love and show mercy to the wounded, afflicted, outcast, and marginalized in your community and beyond?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #5, which contains an informational poster on the Book of James.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPSPR18Letters)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject