

Studies in James

Lesson 7

The Sin of Prejudice

INTRODUCTION:

- I. One of the most common mistakes we make is in attempting to judge the motives of another person.
 - A. Unless they reveal their motive to us in one way or another, there's simply no way we can properly judge WHY some people do certain things. But, we keep doing it anyway – judging others without getting all the facts, then thinking our judgments are accurate.
 1. When we make this kind of assessment, based on what we THINK is the real motive, we form a particular way of relating to that person from that moment on.
 2. The REAL problem with doing this is that we are SOMETIMES completely wrong – in other words, we completely MISJUDGED their motives.
 - B. Rather than taking the time to REALLY GET TO KNOW SOMEONE – to REALLY GET TO KNOW WHAT MAKES THEM TICK – we form opinions and render judgments PREMATURELY.
 1. We "PRE-JUDGE!" We commit the sin of prejudice.

- a. This is what "PREJUDICE" means – pre-judging a particular situation or a particular person BEFORE we have all the facts.
 2. No one can determine the heart of a person on the basis of a FIRST-TIME encounter. We have to become FAMILIAR with the person before we can truly understand them.
 3. THAT’S why prejudice and partiality are so wrong.
- C. However – we need to give a word of caution here!
1. There is a difference between PREJUDICE OR PARTIALITY and DISCERNMENT.
 2. DISCERNMENT is a necessary outgrowth of our becoming spiritually mature.
 - a. It's the ability to use WISDOM to see into particular situations, or to recognize certain character traits about people.
 - b. It's the ability to use WISDOM in such a way as to keep us from becoming victimized, or falling prey to foolish and irresponsible acts.
 3. Let me illustrate it this way:
 - a. If you refused to pick up a hitchhiker because he was of a different racial or ethnic background than you – that's PREJUDICE.

- b. However, if you refused to pick up a hitchhiker because you know the DANGERS involved in having a total stranger in your car – that's DISCERNMENT.
 - c. If you came upon a homeless person who was hungry and was asking for something to eat, and you refused to help feed that person BECAUSE he or she is homeless – that's PREJUDICE.
 - d. If you come upon a homeless person who is clearly intoxicated or high on some drug and they were asking for change, and you declined to give them money because you felt you would be contributing to their alcoholism or drug addiction – that's DISCERNMENT.
4. It really comes down to MOTIVE. It all comes down to the REAL REASON WHY you responded to someone, or even FELT about someone, the way you did.
- a. It comes down to judging OUR motives – not the motives or intentions of others – but our OWN motives for responding toward some people the way we do.
- II. And so, in THIS lesson we're going to come face to face with our OWN feelings of PREJUDICE and PARTIALITY.
- A. We'll be talking about the problem we have of forming FIRST IMPRESSIONS – because that's what prejudice IS.

1. Prejudice (and it doesn't matter what KIND of prejudice we're talking about) is all based upon SURFACE IMPRESSIONS.
 2. And God says these kinds of conclusions and attitudes are WRONG, UNFAIR, and SINFUL.
- B. And so, we're going to take a close look at James 2:1-13. In these thirteen verses, we're going to see how James deals with the sin of PREJUDICE.
1. First, the principle regarding prejudice is STATED by James (v. 1)
 2. Next, the principle is ILLUSTRATED (vs. 2-4)
 3. Then, the principle regarding prejudice is EXPLAINED by James (vs. 5-11)
 4. Finally, the principle is APPLIED (vs. 12-13)
- C. So, let's begin our study.
1. And as we do, there's one thing I need to remind you. If you remember, we talked about this in our last lesson.
 2. As we go through this study on prejudice, I don't want you to be thinking about how this applies to someone else, but rather how the words of James apply to YOU.
 3. The reason WHY you need to make PERSONAL application of this lesson is simply because we ALL have prejudices in one form or another – we ALL form opinions about people we don't really know – opinions that are based on FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

4. So, this is a lesson to ALL of us.

BODY:

- I. First, the principle regarding prejudice is STATED.
 - A. James says, "*My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.*" (**James 2:1**)
 1. If we turn this statement around, James is saying, "Faith in Jesus Christ and partiality are incompatible. "
 - a. The word "*partiality*" (other translations: "*favortisim*") comes from TWO Greek words that are combined to mean, "to receive by face."
 - b. It carries the idea of accepting someone "on face value" alone.
 2. James isn't talking about exercising DISCERNMENT, but rather ACCEPTING OPINIONS about someone "ON FACE VALUE" DURING an INITIAL ENCOUNTER.
 - B. Just an interesting note – the term "*partiality*" or "*favoritism*" is found only THREE OTHER TIMES in the New Testament.
 1. **Acts 10:34-35** – Speaking to Cornelius and those who were with him, Peter said, "*In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.*"

2. **Romans 2:10-11** – The apostle Paul wrote about God's judgment, and said, *"but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God."*
3. **Ephesians 6:9** – The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians about the treatment of slaves by their masters, and said, *"And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him."*
4. In each instance, the scriptures make it clear GOD DOES NOT SHOW PARTIALITY – He does NOT RECEIVE FACES, and does NOT judge on the basis of FIRST IMPRESSIONS.
 - a. MAN may judge by FIRST IMPRESSIONS – or based simply based on EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES – but GOD judges by the HEART!
5. In fact, God SPECIFICALLY told the children of Israel in the Law of Moses that PARTIALITY, or judging on the basis of FIRST IMPRESSIONS is WRONG – regardless WHO they may be judging.
 - a. **Leviticus 19:15-16** – God said, *"You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the*

person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people; nor shall you take a stand against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD."

II. Next, the principle of prejudice is ILLUSTRATED. This illustration is comprised of THREE ELEMENTS.

A. The FIRST element James presents is the SETTING.

1. **James 2:2** – *"For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes..."*
2. Where's the SETTING? James puts the setting in, *"your assembly."*
3. The believers had met for worship, and one of the ushers notices TWO people just walked through the door and are looking for seats.
 - a. One, a WEALTHY man.
 - (1). The phrase, *"a man with gold rings,"* is literally translated, "a gold-fingered man" – meaning he is wearing several very expensive gold rings.

(2). His clothes are exquisite. He is dressed in the finest hand-tailored suit, and wearing the very finest in handcrafted shoes.

(3). He is the very picture of opulence and wealth.

b. The OTHER man who walked through the door at the same time is a POOR man.

(1). James describes his appeal as, "*filthy clothes.*"

(2). The phrase, "*filthy clothes,*" is also translated, "*shabby clothes,*" "*dirty clothes,*" and "*vile raiment.*"

(3). This describes someone whose clothing is so filthy and dirty that the person literally REEKS of foul odor.

4. The usher is suddenly faced with a dilemma. Where is he going to SEAT these two?

a. **Matthew 23:6** tells us there were "*chief seats*" in the synagogues.

(1). The Pharisees loved the "chief seats" (apparently located down front), because they could enter in their elegant robes and march to the front, calling attention to themselves.

b. There is nothing wrong with being wealthy. In fact, most of us wouldn't mind being a little wealthy ourselves.

(1). However, there is a big difference between BEING wealthy and WORSHIPPING WEALTH or WORSHIPPING THE WEALTHY.

B. Now we come to the SECOND element, the RESPONSE. (v. 3)

1. **James 2:3** – *and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool"...*
2. Faced with the dilemma, the usher makes a judgment regarding these two men by JUDGING THE FACE – looking only at the EXTERNAL condition and circumstances of each man.
 - a. And so, he gives the RICH MAN the "*chief seat.*" The RICH MAN is ushered down to the front, and given one of the best seats in the auditorium.
 - b. Then, this SAME USHER, tells the POOR MAN, to sit on the floor, or stand off to the side.
3. Now, I know you are all appalled by what this prejudice and insensitive usher did. But before you are so quick to judge:
 - a. Suppose it's time for worship to begin and two men walk into the building at the same time.
 - (1). One is dressed in the finest suit and handcrafted shoes you've ever seen, and who has just parked his Rolls Royce in front of the building.

- (2). The other is homeless and has just walked in off the street, dressed in dirty, filthy, smelly clothes – and he probably hasn't bathed in days if not weeks.
- b. Now, to make this scenario even more challenging, let's say there is only ONE EMPTY SEAT REMAINING in the whole auditorium, and it's RIGHT NEXT TO YOU.
 - c. And so, the usher quickly, now wanting to offend you by making the decision on his own, walks down the aisle and whispers to you all about these two men, and that the seat next to you is the only empty seat in the house.
 - d. Which of these two men are YOU going to let sit by you?
 - e. Now, before you try to RATIONALIZE your decision – because you've JUST NOW decided in your mind how you would respond to that situation – listen to what James says next.
- C. And that brings us to the THIRD element in this story which is the MOTIVE.
- 1. **James 2:4** – *"have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?"*
 - 2. James describes thoughts or the motive for such a decision as *"EVIL."*

- a. The motive behind your decision is "evil" because a distinction was made between two individuals based on EXTERNAL conditions and circumstances.
 - b. You didn't know EITHER man – EXCEPT that one was rich and the other was poor. One was dressed well, and the other wore dirty clothes. One smelled of expensive cologne and the other smelled of sweat and body odor.
3. In the scenario James provides here – and keep in mind this is HIS scenario, not mine – in the scenario, the MOTIVE is NOT specifically mentioned.
- a. The motive of the usher in this story could be that the usher is prejudiced against certain "class" distinctions.
 - b. Or it could be that the usher catered to the wealthy man, thinking he might get something in return – a favor, etc.
4. The FACT that the MOTIVE is not mentioned shows that there was NO MOTIVE that would JUSTIFY the decision based on EXTERNAL factors only.
- a. You can TRY to rationalize that allowing the homeless person we described earlier to sit by you would be unsanitary and therefore a threat to your health.
 - b. Or you can TRY to rationalize that the body odor of the homeless person would not only bother YOU, but also bother

those sitting AROUND you – and might even make you nauseated.

5. The fact remains that your decision was an EXTERNAL, PREJUDICIAL judgment – a decision based on your OWN selfish interests, that NEVER ONCE took into consideration the "deep-down" KIND of person these two men may REALLY be.
 - a. What I failed to tell you was the RICH man is being investigated by a federal grand jury for investment fraud that cost stockholders in his company to lose their life savings; he has been known for repeated instances of marital infidelity; and the only reason he stopped here was to be seen as a church-going man by the reporters outside who have been following him.
 - b. The homeless man, on the other hand, has been sober for the past three weeks straight, and is DETERMINED to turn his life around, has been reading a battered and torn copy of the Bible someone gave him, and now wants to be baptized into Christ for the remission of his sins, get a job, and return to society as the productive, hard-working man he HAD been before his problem with alcoholism began.
 - c. If there is ANY place where PREJUDICE and judging the FACE should CEASE TO EXIST – it's HERE among US.

- (1). Economic status, rank, race, skin color, political persuasion, type of Christian experience (old faithful vs. new convert), name, apparel, size, smell, etc. should mean NOTHING AT ALL!
- (2). What MATTERS is the condition of a man's heart.

III. Next, the principle regarding prejudice is EXPLAINED by James. He not only tells us that prejudice and superficial judgments are WRONG, he gives us three reasons WHY they are wrong.

A. First, James says prejudice is wrong because it's contrary to God's methods.

1. **James 2:5** – James asks, *"Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?"*

2. The REAL issue here is not wealth or poverty, but the condition of one's soul.

a. God looks at the heart.

b. He judges us from the INSIDE OUT.

B. Second, James says prejudice is wrong because it ignores the universality of sin.

1. **James 2:6-7** – *"But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?"*
 - a. James tells these first-century saints the VERY PEOPLE they were EXALTING were the ones who were bringing them pain and persecution!
 - b. Not only are they persecuting you, *"they BLASPHEME the NAME BY WHICH YOU WERE CALLED!"*
 - (1). There is ABSOLUTELY NOTHING INHERENTLY RIGHTEOUS ABOUT RICH!
 - (2). Many of the rich are not only SINNERS, but the worst kind – they're BLASPHEMERS!
- C. Third, James says prejudice is wrong because it's inconsistent with the Scriptures.
 1. **James 2:8-9** – *"If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you do well; 9 but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors."*
 2. Being partial or prejudiced is an outright contradiction of *"the royal law"* which says, *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*
(Leviticus 19:18)

- a. That kind of contradiction between our behavior and God's commandments IS SIN!
- D. And finally, prejudice is wrong because it tries to make a distinction between BIG sins and LITTLE sins.
1. **James 2:10-11** – *"For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law."*
 2. Which is worse in your eyes, committing adultery or murder? Both sins were punishable by death under the Old Testament Law of Moses.
 3. James uses these two sins to illustrate a point. While the CONSEQUENCES of certain sins may vary, there is NO DIFFERENCE between sins as far as God is concerned – ALL are transgressions of the law, and therefore ALL condemn us to a SPIRITUAL death (spiritual separation from God, or loss of fellowship with God).
 - a. You might think of prejudice or showing partiality as a relatively minor infraction of God's laws.
 - b. But ALL infractions of God's laws bring about the same punishment – DEATH! Why? Simply put, sin is sin, no matter

how BIG or how LITTLE we might think it is – sin makes us
ALL "*a transgressor of the law.*"

- c. You and I might make a distinction between sins, but God doesn't. To God, adultery, murder, and prejudice all fit into the SAME category – sin.
- d. There are no BIG sins and LITTLE sins. There are no BAD sins and NOT SO BAD sins. There are no MAJOR VIOLATIONS of the law, and MINOR INFRACTIONS of the law.
- e. ALL are VIOLATIONS, and ALL are just as BIG as the next.

IV. Finally, James shows us how the principle about prejudice is to be APPLIED.

- A. God knows it's not easy for us to change attitudes and prejudices – especially those we may have had since birth. But He STILL expects those changes to be MADE!
 - 1. That's biblical Christianity!
 - 2. God gave His only Begotten Son, and Jesus shed His blood on the cross, so that we could rise ABOVE our attitudes and prejudices.
 - 3. If there is ANYTHING the Bible teaches about differences between those of a different race, ethnic background, economic status, or any OTHER difference we can think of – the Bible tells us there ARE NO DIFFERENCES!

- a. BEFORE we came to Christ, we were ALL in the same category – sinners.
 - b. And AFTER we came to Christ, we have ALL been in the same category – ONE IN CHRIST!
- B. So, knowing we need to MAKE this change, how CAN we change?
- James tells us there are TWO THINGS we need to do.
1. First, let the Scriptures, the law of liberty, be the standard by which you act toward EVERYONE else.
 - a. **James 2:12** – *"So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty."*
 - b. **John 12:48** – Jesus put it this way, *"He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him – the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day."*
 - c. Since we're going to be JUDGED by the law of liberty in the last day, then we need to watch how we SPEAK to others (or ABOUT others), and we need to watch what we DO to others (or how we TREAT others).
 2. Second, let mercy be your message.
 - a. **James 2:13** – *"For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment."*

- b. The FIRST part of this verse is just another way of saying, "there will be no mercy toward those who have shown no mercy."
 - (1). Thayer defines "*mercy*" as, "readiness to help those in trouble." (Thayer's Greek Lexicon)
 - (2). Simply put, there will be no readiness on God's part to help US in the day of judgment, if we haven't shown a readiness to help OTHERS here.

- c. The LAST part of this verse says, "*Mercy triumphs over judgment.*"
 - (1). This is just another way of saying God's mercy and grace is the ONLY way we can hope to come through the judgment.
 - (2). If we SHOW mercy in this life, God's mercy toward us will be GREATER THAN, and will WIN THE VICTORY OVER, the JUDGMENT we rightly deserve.

CONCLUSION:

- I. When I preached in the mid-south some years ago, I heard about one of the most blatant displays of racial prejudice I have ever encountered.

A. A man in this small community was so racially prejudiced that he bought all the cemetery plots around his OWN so that no black person could be buried next to him.

1. What makes this blatant act of racism so serious is the man who did this was a member of the church.
2. And the fact that his health was declining and he could no longer get out to attend worship services, didn't seem to matter (although, he WAS able to get out and go fishing occasionally).
3. Sadly, his health took a sudden turn for the worse, and when I arrived at the hospital that same day, his body was being wheeled out of the hospital room and down the hall to a waiting elevator that would take him down to the morgue in the basement.

II. Prejudice and showing partiality in ANY FORM is clearly a sin.

A. So what are you doing to remove prejudice from your life?

1. You may be fighting years of cultural influence – maybe even generations of prejudice.
2. But, if you expect to find mercy on the day of judgment, you need to do all you can to remove ALL forms of prejudice and partiality from your life.

B. You can BEGIN the sin of prejudice from your life this very night.

1. If you've never been baptized into Christ for the remission of your sins, you can have all past prejudices, and every other sin, completely and forever removed from your life by simply coming to the Lord now in complete obedience to the gospel of CHrist.
2. And, if you're a child of God who has been harboring the sin of prejudice and partiality in your life, repent of that sin and confess it to God, asking for that sin to be blotted from your life, and for the strength to overcome it in the future.