

PROFILES IN YOUTH STRESS

THE SOCIAL SCENE

JAMES 2:1-13

1. James is a brief letter to early Christians from one of Jesus' brothers (or half-brothers, if you like) about living the Christian life. It may be best known for its section on faith and works in the last half of Ch. 2, but we will look at the first half of this chapter instead because it talks about social favoritism or what we might call popularity. But before reading, mention any other facts and information about James, his letter, and his times. (Check the introduction of the Letter of James in your Bible. Find it toward the end of the New Testament.)
2. Before reading James 2:1-13 or reading it again, name some obvious ways that you see people—including yourself—practice favoritism, play favorites, or show special and perhaps unfair treatment for and against others. Include the usual suspects here such as cliques, teachers, parents, etc., but also consider some less conspicuous examples.

Now go ahead and read or re-read James 2:1-13. Offer any overall impressions or reactions you may have.

3. James starts right off with a warning about not showing favoritism or partiality, that is, giving special treatment or consideration to some people over others. Discuss why we are usually annoyed by favoritism when we see it. Discuss further why we're not so bothered by favoritism when we're the one seeking or receiving that special, preferential treatment.
4. James does not sound very favorable toward those who are financially well-to-do. His words in 2:6-7, for instance, are pretty harsh. Isn't this self-contradictory as a sort of "reverse favoritism" that favors not being favorable to a particular group? Discuss a bit about how James' recollection of Jesus and his understanding of the Gospel might lead him to this position. (You might also read his further comments in James 4:13 - 5:6.)
5. But don't we need some people who have material and financial gifts to contribute? And perhaps it's wise to recognize these people for what they can contribute that others cannot. Discuss whether favoritism lowers stress, increases stress, or neither for persons, groups, and communities. (Additional readings could include Acts 16:14-15 about Lydia whose generosity is welcome and Mk 6:30-44, the feeding the 5000, where God amplifies even the least generosity.)
6. In the first decades and centuries of the church, Christians were writing and reading lots of books and letters about what God had done in Christ. It was good news, and they were excited about it and what it meant. Yet only twenty-seven of these documents were finally collected into what we read as the New Testament. James' letter was an early contribution but not always included in all the churches' collections of selected writings. Discuss possible reasons why some Christians did not read James as often as they read other writings like Paul's letters. Consider whether James' words about favoritism could be one of those reasons.
7. But aren't there some realistic distinctions among us? Some of us are smarter, better looking, faster, funnier, stronger, more articulate, etc. Who gets to decide which abilities or characteristics are more valuable than others? (This is pretty complicated, so think about it.) Take a look at James 1:17 and discuss what James might say about the kinds of favoritism we practice today.
8. If you happen to be one of the favored ones (the good son, the cute girl, the popular one, etc.), in what ways does this make life easier for you and tougher for you?

If you happen to be one of the less-favored ones (the loner, the unpopular one, the trouble-maker, etc.), in what ways does this make life tougher for you and easier for you?

If you happen to be one of the many-in-the-middle, in what ways does this make life easier or tougher for you?

In any of these cases, the Gospel of Christ calls us to a different way of being, not favored by human practices and not disfavored by God. Discuss whether God's Word really makes any difference in how you perceive and experience the social scene.

9. An old saying goes like this: “I see you seeing me. I see the me I think you see.” First, decode this saying and try to explain what it means. Then discuss how God sees us, why he sees us this way, and whether how he sees us has anything to do with Christ.
10. At some point, we begin thinking about our life as a story and reciting things that happen to us as episodes in that story. (Recall a few conversations in the lunch room, hallway, or on the phone.) In our text, James doesn’t like the way that some of his fellow Christians are telling the stories of their community. He thinks these episodes are being lived and told in ways that are less than true. He says God has a different story to tell about us. Discuss how God’s version of our story differs from the version we and others may be telling. (Check out James 2:8-13 and especially 12-13.)

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THE ACADEMIC SCENE

ACTS 12:20-25

1. This story about Herod Agrippa, one of several Herodian kings in and around Judea in New Testament times, is Luke's closing episode in his chapters about the early church in Jerusalem. Go ahead and read (or re-read) this brief account. Then offer some initial reactions and pose some opening questions in order to start figuring out Luke's larger story. You'd have to read chapters 1 - 12 to get the entire picture, but for now skim Ch. 12 and help each other recall some earlier stories in Acts. Propose some summaries of what's going on here.
2. The Herod of this story is Herod Agrippa I, usually just called Agrippa. He was a smart, smooth operator who excelled in the best schools of Rome where he made political connections with people in high places. Making these right moves eventually gained him a kingship. What do you think about this strategy for life? Discuss whether academics is highly important, somewhat important, or not so important.
3. Agrippa was angry with the people of the cities of Tyre and Sidon (12:20) because they were angry with him. He had punished some non-Jewish youths for putting a statue of Caesar in a Jewish synagogue in that region. The people there protested this punishment. He threatened to block the food trade with their cities if they didn't shape up. But they knew he wasn't really a Jewish king. Rather, he had gotten himself appointed king by cheating his way to the top through payoffs, using connections, and falsifying documents. Yet in many ways, he assisted both the Jewish people by supporting their worship life at the temple and synagogues and his non-Jewish subjects by improving their cities with important building projects. Discuss how much cheating goes on in your classes. Discuss further how life's complications sometimes create the conditions for cheating.
4. Some of us experience a lot of academic stress and pressure. Some of us aren't much worried about academics. Discuss what makes grades and academics important to some people and why grades and academics are not important to others. Consider the influence of past school experience, whether we've been successful or not, parent expectations, who we hang around with, whether teachers care, other things we're more interested in, and the goals we want to accomplish.
5. Think about how academics is really about the future or, at least, it's supposed to be: continued education, the right job, a good income, and so forth. Discuss how much or how little academics determines one's future.
6. Next, notice that the future is about hope and hope is about the future. This connection brings us to the Gospel, God's promises to us for today, tomorrow, and forever. We don't know a lot about Agrippa, but discuss what he seemed to believe about hope and his future.
7. "You make your own luck." This is a popular saying in business and leadership books. "God is in control." This is a popular saying among some Christians. What do you think: does the Christian who trusts God to take care of the future work actively to shape that future; or does the Christian who trusts God wait for the future to happen?
8. Academics could be connected to several of the Ten Commandments such as "Honor your father and mother," "Don't steal," "Don't bear false witness," and "Don't covet." And all the commandments link back to the First Commandment, "Have no other gods." Luther says that a god is whatever we put our trust in for the future. Discuss whether academics qualifies as a god. And discuss whether blowing off academics qualifies as a god.
9. Agrippa was what some people call "a self-made man." That is, he used his opportunities well and maneuvered his way through life's ups and downs in order to achieve what he wanted. He didn't hesitate to alter the truth or use other people to get what he wanted. And he worked hard and played hard along the way. We'd probably base a reality TV show on him today. In 12:22-23, Luke obviously thinks Herod went too far. Discuss how far is too far.
10. Up to this chapter in the Book of Acts, Judas is dead (1:15-20), Stephen has been killed (Acts 7:54-60), James has been killed (12:1-2), and assorted other disasters have occurred. Yet Luke writes in 12:24, "But the word of God continued to increase and spread." Discuss to what extent we ought to pursue our academic and other aims, given both life's disasters and the increase of God's word.

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THE COMPETITIVE SCENE

I SAMUEL 18:1-16

1. The story of David and Saul would make a good mini-series. It's long, complicated, and entangled with violence, sex, betrayal, and special effects. But it also features courage, friendship, loyalty, compassion, and the power of faith. In fact, it's a key turning point in what is called "salvation history," that is, God's work among the sinful people of Israel to move forward his plan of salvation for all sinful people in Jesus, the Messiah.

But before reading this part of the story, recall other events in the life of David and the land of Israel in David's time. (Check the introduction to I Samuel in your Bible, a book found about a quarter of the way through the Bible.) If time permits, try to sort out the major events in David's life.

2. Read or re-read I Samuel 18:1-16. One point of interest to notice in this episode is the rivalry and competition between David and Saul. Discuss different views about competition. Is it good, bad, both, neither? Does it depend on the situation? Does competition give interest and fun to life? Or does it create a lot of stress and hassles?
3. In 18:5-7 the cheerleaders meet David and Saul as they return from battle. In 18:8-9 we see that Saul is not pleased. Consider two or three ways besides anger and jealousy that the king could have chosen to respond. Discuss whether personal rivalries are inevitable or avoidable in life.
4. In a TV mini-series, the usual competitor and rival would be Jonathan, Saul's son, in line to be the next king. But in 18:1-4, Jonathan and David become the best of friends. The story doesn't give us much information but, instead, is written in a way to make us wonder about this. Discuss what might explain this great friendship rather than rivalry.
5. Unlike a TV show, one reason that the stories in the Bible hold up over the centuries is that they don't just spell everything for us. For example, on the friendship of Jonathan and David, discuss whether this good friendship will be a blessing for one or both of them or a source of stress for one or both of them. (Read the rest of the story in later chapters such as I Samuel 19-20.)
6. David is clearly a champion. The people love him. So how about us—do we like this guy or not really? In life, a few among us seem to excel. Most of us just get along okay. Consider whether it matters one way or the other?
7. The Bible experts don't quite know what to make of 18:10 and have suggested different explanations for this curious verse. (A parallel passage is in 16:14-23.) Sound out a few ideas about what may be going on here. The text seems to connect Saul's behavior in 18:10 to his rivalry and conflict with David in 18:8-9. Explore the troublesome consequences of unhealthy competition and rivalry as you have observed them for individuals, groups, teams, etc.
8. We find a disturbing statement in 18:12 and a source of stress and distress for some people. Folks often wonder whether God is for them or against them, especially when life goes badly. Consider some times when people believe God is with them or has left them and why they would believe this. Examine the idea that God doesn't leave us but we leave God. (You might want to include in this discussion Jesus' closing promise in Matthew 28:20.)
9. In the New Testament, Jesus is called "the son of David." Name some ways that Jesus is like David and not like David. Name some ways that (in the words of I Samuel 18:12) God "was with" Jesus and "had departed from" or "left" Jesus.
10. Competition and rivalry are complicated parts of life—not always good, not always bad. Take a look at the following two additional texts and discuss the times and conditions in which competition can be harmful and helpful.

Philippians 2:1-11

Philippians 4:8-9

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THE FUTURE SCENE

1 CORINTHIANS 3:5-22

1. I Corinthians is a complex letter written by Paul to a congregation that had a boatload of problems. You may already know parts of the letter such as the famous chapter on love (ch 13), his interesting chapter on the resurrection (ch 15), and his chapter on whether or not to marry (ch 7). In this study, we're interested in a section about goals for life today and for the future. But before reading, mention any other facts and information about Paul and his letter. (Check the introduction to I Corinthians in your Bible. The letter comes after Romans but before [take a guess].)
2. Before reading I Corinthians 3:5-22 or reading it again, sound out one another in the group or class on your ideas and feelings about the future. Do you have plans and goals? Do you prefer to ignore the future and let it take care of itself? Any thoughts about what aims in life are worth pursuing, if any? Do others talk to you or nag you about the future? Are you a goal-oriented person? As you think about it, do you find that you are working toward some aims and some sort of future but hadn't really noticed this before? Where did you get these goals and life plans for the future? Is all this goals and future stuff intriguing, boring, bothersome, exciting, stressful?

Now go ahead and read or re-read I Corinthians 3:5-22. Offer any overall impressions or reactions.

3. In 3:6, Paul talks about planting and watering. These are future-oriented behaviors done in hope and faith for some as-yet-unseen outcome. Talk some about how our decisions and behaviors that are future-oriented may also say some things about our faith ideas and what we believe about the future, keeping in mind that "faith" may or may not be especially religious.
4. The foundation Paul refers to in 3:10-11 is the work that Jesus did in his ministry, death, and resurrection to "build" our salvation for us. (In I Peter 2:7, Peter uses Psalm 118:22 to talk about Jesus as the cornerstone for a foundation. John 14:2 says, "In my father's house there are many rooms.") But lots of people build their lives on lots of foundations other than Jesus. Identify some obvious and less obvious examples of foundations that people use for life. Is it possible for a person not to have some foundation?
5. Recall the story of the three little pigs and what they built their houses with. Since most fairy tales come from some earlier source, some readers have wondered if someone long ago used 3:12 as a starter idea for that fairy tale. All the materials in Paul's list have, in fact, been used in construction, but obviously he's making an analogy here to our lives. Take some time and work out Paul's analogy, trying some different comparisons to real life. What might we build a life out of? What kind of life would it be? What would such a life come to in the end?
6. The "fire" Paul mentions in 3:13 that tests our life-construction work is part of his analogy or illustration. Fire was a common way of testing or refining materials in Biblical times just as it is today, and does not especially refer to hell. But he is saying that at the last day, whatever we've done with the life God gives us will be examined. Discuss whether that is good news or bad news.
7. Doesn't Paul's description here sound something like our being saved by our works? It sure doesn't sound like what he says in Ephesians 2:8-9. Does it sound like what he says in Ephesians 2:10? See if you can harmonize Paul's description of our works being examined and tested in I Corinthians 3:12-15 with what he says elsewhere about not being saved by works but saved by our faith and trust in Jesus.
8. If our life work survives the test, we receive a reward (3:14). If our life work does not stand the test, we suffer loss (3:15) — though we're still saved and go to heaven. Hmm. First of all, exactly what work is Paul talking about? And what reward and loss is he talking about?
9. You may know that Paul and other New Testament writers often describe the Christian as the temple of God, as Paul does in 3:16-17. Lots of Christians really like this comparison (which is curious since we don't have too many temple buildings around anymore to look at). Paul's statement here about us as God's temple fits with his building imagery but seems to be both positive and negative. Discuss whether his words are encouraging or threatening or both.

10. After this look at planting (3:5-8) and building (3:8-15) and temples (3:16-17), hash out some ideas of what you and others are thinking about your life's short-term and long-term plans, goals, aims, and big projects. What's worthwhile? What's not? What does it all amount to in the end? Be sure to take a look at 3:21-22 for the big picture. And you could also check some related big-picture texts in Mt 7:21-29, Phil 3:4-21, and I Cor 7:29-31.