

Clearing the Stereotype:
You Christians Are Judgmental
A Study of James 2:1

Big Idea: Lift the face.

Related Scriptures: Leviticus 19:15; 1 Samuel 16:7; Matthew 7:1-5; John 8:3-11; 41-49;
Acts 10:34-35; 15:8-9; Romans 2:11; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; James 2:2-9; 1 Peter 3:13-16

Introduction:

1. Our New Year's resolution at Moon Valley is to ► seek seven. We're asking God to use each and every one of us to help seven people move a little farther down the road toward a relationship with Christ in 2009.

But there is an obstacle in that road, and we need to ► clear the way. There is a six-headed stereotype that stands between our seven and Christ.

- "You Christians are hypocritical."
- "You Christians are too focused on getting converts."
- "You Christians are antihomosexual."
- "You Christians are sheltered."
- "You Christians are too political."
- "You Christians are judgmental."

This is the prevailing image unbelievers have of us as Christians.¹ It hinders their progress toward Christ. It makes them feel like they don't belong with us. And they're never going to believe unless they first feel like they belong. They check us out before they check Christ out. They come to community before they come to Christ.

We need to clear the way.

2. Last Sunday, I talked about clearing ► the stereotype: "You Christians are too focused on getting converts."

I argued that part of the problem is that we Christians sometimes don't act like we care about unbelievers as individuals. As a demonstration of our love for those outside our

¹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).

church—and our seven in particular—we need to give our best for our guests. Specifically, I asked you to do two things.

- a. First, I asked you to invite your seven to your home with no other motive than to serve them and to enjoy their company.

Have you scheduled the dinner yet? Or maybe just dessert?

Neither have I. Not since last Sunday. But here's what I'm going to do. I'm not going to put, "Invite my seven" on my to-do list because that's not really the first step. Inviting is maybe Step Three for Step Four.

For me, Step One would be to schedule a time to look at my calendar. Just a time to look. Just to see what dates might work. Maybe I could put that down as the step I'll take on Tuesday. Then, on Tuesday, when I have the dates, I can schedule the next step. Set aside a time to decide which of the seven to invite. Maybe I could do that on Thursday. You get the idea.

Sometimes if I don't break up something like this into one very small step at a time, I don't take any steps at all.

I know one guy who's already taken the steps. He's got a bunch of friends coming over to his house for the Super Bowl. Super seven. That's great.

Invite your seven to your home. That's the first thing I asked you to do.

- b. And I asked you to do a second thing. I asked you to join me in being extraordinary hosts to the guests who come to our church home on Sunday mornings. I asked you to express your interest in joining me to serve periodically on a special hospitality team that I will lead.

I could use a hundred; I got sixty. I'm thankful and it makes sense. Only about sixty percent of our regular attenders are here on any given Sunday. Well it's another Sunday, and forty more would be good, so I'm asking again.

If you might be interested in finding out more about being a part of a special hospitality team, please just write the number ten on the Connection Card on your chair, along with your contact information, and put it in the tall wooden box between the double doors in the back as you leave. Someone will then invite you to a meeting where I will tell you more about what I have in mind.

3. That brings us to today's decapitation. I want to try to lop off another head on the six-headed stereotype. This time ► it's, "You Christians are judgmental." And it's one of the biggest, ugliest heads.

Nine out of ten young unbelievers in America say we Christians are judgmental.² Nine out of ten. So there's a pretty good chance that at least six of your seven link you with that term: Judgmental. Even if you don't deserve it.

Let me read you a couple of quotes from unbelievers that reflect this view. These are perceptions that you will likely face if you seek your seven.

One person ► says, "Christians talk about hating sin and loving sinners, but the way they go about things, they might as well call it what it is. They hate the sin and the sinner."³

Another person ► says, "Christians like to hear themselves talk. They are arrogant about their beliefs, but they never bother figuring out what other people actually think. They don't seem very compassionate, especially when they feel strongly about something."⁴

4. How ► can we clear this obstacle of being perceived as judgmental without compromising our beliefs? How can we behead the stereotype and not betray the Scriptures?

The Scriptures tell us. There are a lot of passages that apply. Today I want to look at just one verse that goes a long way. It's ► James 2:1. It's about being judgmental. If you have a Bible with you, I invite you to turn there. If you don't have a Bible, well you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Just kidding. I'll be putting the verses up on the screen. James ► 2:1 says,

^{NAU} James 2:1 My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with *an attitude of* personal favoritism.

- I. First, I think it's useful to recognize that this verse is talking about the way we hold our faith in Jesus. The way we present ourselves as followers of Christ. The way we come across to other people.

The phrase ► "hold your faith" could actually be translated "wear your faith."⁵ It's what people see. It's the obvious.

James says we are ► not to hold our faith with an attitude. No attitude. No attitude of personal favoritism.

- II. What exactly is ► personal favoritism?

² Ibid, 182.

³ Ibid, 181.

⁴ Ibid, 182.

⁵ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, s.v. "ἔχω," (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

- A. The original Greek word behind the English translation is *pros-o-poe-lem-PSEE-a*. It's a compound of two Greek words, and it literally means "lifting the face," or "receiving the face."⁶ It is believed that the Jewish New Testament writers coined the term as a literal Greek translation of a well-known Hebrew expression found in the Old Testament that also means lifting or receiving the face.⁷ It's a figure of speech tied to the ancient custom of bowing before another person as a form of humble greeting. If, in response, the other person lifted or received the face of the bowed person, it was a sign of honor or respect.⁸

By the way, the ancient custom of lifting the face is to be distinguished from the modern custom of having a face lift. Two different things. Don't confuse them.

The ancient custom is such ► a tender picture honor. Lift the face. What a gentle show of respect. Lift the face. What a kind affirmation of value. Lift the face.

Our word, however, has a negative connotation. And it's used negatively in our text. Favoritism means to show honor and respect to some but not others based on perceived differences. It's a form of discrimination or prejudice or bigotry. We lift the face of some but not others.

- B. James gives us a specific example of favoritism so we know the kind of favoritism he's talking about. In ► Verse 2, he says,

^{NAU} James 2:2 For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes

The hypothetical ► assembly probably describes believers gathered together for worship. The modern parallel would be our worship gatherings on Sunday morning, or our Life Groups gathered in homes during in the week.

Two guest walk into the assembly. They're not together.

The one is dressed to the nines; the other looks homeless. The one has some bling; the other has some string. To keep his pants up. The one is surrounded by the smell of cologne; the other is surrounded by a cloud of acrid body odor.

James then poses a hypothetical response in ► Verse 3, saying,

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, D.A. Carson, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 102; W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, unabridged ed., s.v. "persons , προσωπολημψία," (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing, n.d.).

⁷ (Moo, 102)

⁸ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, vol. 6, s.v. "προσωπολημψία," by Lohse, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1968), 779.

^{NAU} James 2:3 and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool”

The Greek word behind the ► translation, “pay special attention to” is *e-pi-BLEP-o*. It means to pay more respect to, or to show greater honor toward someone. You welcome warmly the rich-looking guy and give him the best seat in the house. You lift his face.

The other guy who doesn’t look so good—you make him stand, or have him sit in a subservient position at your feet. Maybe you ask him to polish your shoes while he’s down there.

I suspect James is exaggerating to make his point: We often treat people differently based on face value. In fact, I suspect that virtually every person in this room—I’m included—has an unpublished, unspoken list of certain kinds of people we gravitate toward and certain kinds of people we could do without. It’s the desireables and the undesirable. The Dreamboats and the Duds. The ones who belong and the ones who don’t. And it can affect how we treat them.

Are there certain kinds of people that you would find very difficult to greet warmly? Are there certain kinds of people that you would be reluctant to invite to your Life Group, or to your home?

How about a man who dresses like a woman? Or how about a convicted pedophile? Or how about a porn star? Hmm.

Two guests walk into our assembly, Moon Valley Bible Church, on Sunday morning. They’re not together.

To one, I say: “Ah, I lift your face, my friend. My republican, pro-life, anti-gay, anti-evolution friend with no tattoos or improper piercing. I receive your face.”

And toward the other, I’m thinking to myself: “But, *you*. I’m not lifting *you*. You left-wing, pro-choice, Darwinian homosexual. Keep your pierced face down and your tattoos covered.”

I’m displaying favoritism, and James says to me in ► Verse 4,

^{NAU} James 2:4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves . . . ?

The Greek term used for ► making distinctions—*dee-a-KRIN-o*—is used here to clearly convey a judgment of superiority. Favoritism judges another person to be superior or inferior on face value. In the example of our text, the rich-looking guy is

judged to be superior to the poor-looking guy. And they are treated accordingly. One is lifted, the other is left. That's being judgmental.

Down in ► Verse 6, James says,

^{NAU} James 2:6 But you have dishonored the poor man. . . .

To ► dishonor is to “deprive someone of honor or respect.”⁹ To dishonor someone is to treat them beneath their true stature before God. You don't lift the face.

At this point, someone may say, “But Bob, the text is not talking about a moral issue. Being poor is not immoral. Immorality is different.”

Good point. But here's a story. Some religious folks in the Bible knew what the Bible says. Fornication is wrong. It's a moral issue. And because they did not believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, they pointed their self-righteous finger. They said Jesus was born of fornication. He's morally tainted. In response Jesus ► said:

^{NAU} John 8:49 “. . . you dishonor Me.”

Maybe that's what unbelievers are saying to us: “You dishonor me.” Maybe we Christians are considered judgmental in America because too many of us on too many occasions have dishonored or disrespected people who happen to be different or happen to view things differently than we do. And so, many nonChristians have concluded that we think we're better than they are—that we're self-righteous, moralistic, arrogant.¹⁰ We lift the face of those who pass our holy litmus test. If you don't pass, we don't lift your face, we rub your nose in it.

The big idea of my message is simple: ► Lift the face. Every face.

III. But what if you don't agree with what people are doing? What if you disagree strongly? In fact, what if you believe what they're doing is immoral? Wouldn't lifting the face be legitimizing sin? Don't we have a certain responsibility to judge, to set them straight?

If, for example, we have solid biblical reasons to think abortion is immoral, shouldn't we take a stand? Maybe even put a bumper sticker on our car: “Abortion stills a beating heart.”

⁹ W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “ἀτιμάζω,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

¹⁰ A couple of verses later in Verse 8, James says, “If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,’ you are doing well.” The “if, however” sets up a contrast. Loving one another is the contrasting opposite of favoritism. Love has regard for people; favoritism disregards them. Favoritism is a failure to love.

Good question. The answers are not always tidy, at least not for me. The older I get the less I know for sure.

But remember. James 2:1 is talking about the way we hold our faith in Jesus. The way we present ourselves as followers of Christ. The way we come across to other people. How do I wear my faith? What do my “Christian clothes” look like? Does the label say, “Lift the face”? Or does it say, “Judgmental.”

You may be thinking, “Bob, are you suggesting that I should just back off on moral issues about which I feel strongly? Are you asking me to compromise my biblical convictions?”

No, I’m not. Not at all. I’m saying we ought to be careful to honor people. To lift the face. Even if the face is different. Even if we disagree with the face. Maybe especially if we disagree.

Think about it. Jesus Christ came to die for a whole bunch of people who disagreed with Him on major moral issues. He lifted the face of an adulteress. He lifted my face. It’s grace. Grace lifts the face.

Well, what would it look like to lift the face today? Let’s wade into a real situation with real people. It’s a situation that could happen right here at Moon Valley and probably has. It’s the kind of situation that will crop up more and more if we are truly seeking seven. A twenty-nine-year-old mother of two toddlers tells the ► story:

A few weeks ago I visited a Christian Bible study at a church. Every once in a while I go because I know a few of the women. ► You know, I am still trying to figure out this Jesus thing. ► After the speaker talked for a while, we started a conversation at our table—about eight or nine of us women just chatting away. . . .

► We were talking about sex, intimacy, and pregnancy, stuff like that. ► I told them about a friend of mine who was considering an abortion. ► I told them her entire situation, a twenty-year-old, boyfriend left her. She’s feeling really alone. I made some comment about really empathizing with my friend, that I could understand that abortion might make sense. ► I guess that shocked them. I know the women there are pro-life and all—I don’t know what I am, pro-life or pro-choice or just myself. ► But the conversation shifted at that point in a really weird way. ► Instead of having a dialogue, I was put on the defensive. They were nice enough about it, but the ladies just kept talking at me, trying to fix my attitude about abortion.

► And here’s the part that bothers me, something I never told them. ► What they didn’t know is that I had an abortion—a long time ago. It was not an experience I would wish on anyone. But I can feel my friend’s dilemma because I lived it. I am not sure the Christians I hung out with that morning get that.

► *I guess the truth is I was hoping for some empathy myself.*¹¹

► Question. Did this experience move this twenty-nine-year-old mother a little farther down the road to finding grace in Christ? Or was it an obstacle?

In that situation, how could we clear the way without compromising the Word?

I don't have tidy formula or template. I don't have the magic words to say. But it's not about formulas or templates or magic words anyway. It's about an attitude.

When the abortion thing was put out there and the young woman says, ► “But the conversation shifted at that point in a really weird way,” I can just see that unfolding. I can feel the “weird” shift. It feels like someone just got on the intercom with an oh-my-god announcement: “Abortion sympathizer on Table 7. Abortion sympathizer on Table 7. Bring a mop.”

Listen again to this woman. Really listen to what she has to say. She says,

► *Instead of having a dialogue, I was put on the defensive. . . . the ladies just kept talking at me, trying to fix my attitude about abortion.*

Is this really about agreeing or disagreeing on abortion? No. It's about honoring or dishonoring. Having a dialogue is honoring; being put on the defensive is not. Talking *with* someone is honoring; talking *at* someone is not. Trying to exchange ideas with someone is honoring; trying to *fix* them is not.

Can you have a dialogue, can you talk *with* someone, can you exchange ideas with someone in a way that clearly conveys your convictions about major moral issues of the day *and* lifts the face? Absolutely. We can lift the face without legitimizing sin. And we must.

Jesus lifted the face of an adulteress about to be stoned by some judgmental religious people. And then He said, “sin no more.”¹² The order is not coincidental. Lift first.

In response to the young mother who floated the idea of abortion, a Christian woman at the table could have spoken up and said something like this:

Wow. Your friend is in a terrible situation. I can see where she would feel completely alone. And scared. She's facing a tough decision with no easy options. I can certainly see why she would be thinking about an abortion. I certainly don't condemn her for that.

¹¹ Kinnaman and Lyons, 181-182.

¹² John 8:11.

But I do hope she will be able to consider all sides of the issue without feeling pressured or judged one way or another. We're here at a Bible study, and I do believe there are some important biblical principles that speak to the issue. If you're interested, I'd be happy to share what I believe, or connect you with somebody who knows a whole lot more than I do, including some who have had an abortion and could share their story. I think this is a pretty safe place to sort things out. I'd like to help in any way I can. But right now, would you mind if I just prayed for your friend?

That would be just one approach that might be respectful and honoring, as long as there's no attitude. More than words, the attitude is the thing.

Faces are important. People have faces. Arguments don't. If I don't lift the face, I won't see it. And if I don't see it, I'm afraid I won't love it. And if I don't love it, all my faceless theological arguments fall flat as a bumper sticker.

Question. Why did this young woman bring it up? Why did she float the idea of abortion when she knew that these Christian ladies were pro-life? Was she looking for a debate?

I've seen this kind of thing happen time and time again in conversation with people still trying to figure out this Jesus thing. A trial balloon is floated on some moral issue to see how we respond.

The young mother ► explains it: "I guess the truth is I was hoping for some empathy myself."

Wow.

I think it's another way of saying, "I was hoping somebody here would lift my face."