

## **Race and Poverty: Five-Session Study Guide**

### **Lesson 3 Seeing the Pain**

#### **Focal Passage: James 2:1–13**

**Session Synopsis:** The divisiveness of race, class, and neglect is real. There are real consequences when we make unfair judgments. God has chosen us, *not* to judge people who experience poverty but to love those in need as we love ourselves.

**Key Verse:** “Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” (James 2:4).

#### **Session Objectives**

Participants will:

- explore the concept of redemptive suffering
- explore how partiality is present in their own lives, in the church, and also woven into our social structures as revealed in the hurricane tragedies
- explore their own experiences of hardship and powerlessness
- seek empathy with those we call the poor and marginalized
- allow the experience of kinship and empathy to lay the groundwork for planning strategies to address injustice and poverty in future sessions

#### **Preparation**

- Prayerfully review the session and ask God to open your eyes and transform your life so that you might lead others.
- Carefully read the Scripture text and spend some time thinking about the ways you respond to people with partiality and also reflect on times you have felt powerless.
- Make copies and as gather items noted in Materials Needed.

#### **Materials Needed**

- Bibles
- copies of Participants’ Pieces for each person
- a tray with disposable cups, one per person, with only half containing a small amount of drinking water; keep the rest empty
- crackers (saltines are fine)
- large glass jar or clear pitcher with water and coffee grounds (those from morning coffee will work)
- a table for all to gather around

#### **Gathering**

As participants gather, offer a word of welcome, share prayer requests, and lead an opening prayer. Review together Participants’ Piece # 1, “Them and Us?” as an introduction to the session.

## **The Missional Moment**

### *Activity 1: Explore own experiences of personal disaster and/or marginalization*

Remind the group that one of the most damaging aspects of disaster is the traumatic experience of feeling different, of feeling less powerful than others, or of feeling isolated by your suffering. Explain that we compound the trauma to those who experience disaster firsthand when we don't see ourselves in others.

Invite participants to spend some time quietly recalling a time when they went through a difficult experience or hardship. Encourage them in particular to think about an experience in which things were beyond their control, in which they had to wait, accept what was happening, and the only thing they had to hang onto was hope. After a period of reflection, invite some sharing with questions such as:

- How did you feel during that experience?
- Were there times when it was impossible to *feel* hopeful?
- Were there aspects of the experience that rendered you marginalized or powerless? For example, in a medical crisis, did you have to deal with personnel who wouldn't give you answers or an insurance situation that was impossible to solve? Or in a financial crisis, did you have to deal with companies that messed up records or computerized systems that didn't allow for difficult circumstances?
- What or who, if anyone, made it easier for you to get through? Did you find others to lean on, or were you feeling completely alone?
- During the experience what, if anything, reminded you of God's love?
- How much of a factor were people's responses to how much you suffered?
- Looking back, what did that experience teach you about how God works in this world?

### *Activity 2: Explore some of the partiality that has been revealed in the hurricane disaster*

Review together Participants' Piece #2, "Injustice Appears in the Eye of the Storm," then move immediately into Activity 1 of Missional Mandate.

## **The Missional Mandate**

### *Activity 1: Define "The Poor"*

Review Participants Piece #3, "A Brief Synopsis of the Bible and Poverty," then spend some time identifying those in contemporary culture who fit within the category "the poor." Take care to identify specific groups of people and why they qualify, according to biblical definition, as "poor."

### *Activity 2: Explore the Text*

Review the following background material and share pertinent information with your group. Then read together James 2:1–13.

**The Book of James:** While tradition holds that this "letter" was written by the brother of Jesus, its Greek style leads many scholars to conclude the author was a Hellenistic Jewish Christian who lived many years after James, the brother of Jesus. Whatever the case, James, which is more a collection of guidelines for living than a letter, contains teachings that are similar to those of Jesus. The strength of this book lies in its clear and to-the-point instructions for a faith that is

validated through action. This strength has also historically been its weakness. As the biblical canon was being formed, James's emphasis on "doing" made it suspect among church leaders who wished to keep the book out of the Bible. Contemporary readers who want to embrace grace while neglecting the demands of the gospel are sometimes uncomfortable with James's central theme of the inseparability of faith and obedience. Having weathered its critics, the book of James indeed became part of the Christian Bible, to forever call us to an authentic Christianity, which manifests itself in faithful living.

**James 2:1-13:** Respect for the poor is one of five key areas of interest that James addresses repeatedly. Early Christians may have been tempted to give preference to people with wealth and power because they could provide needed money and protection to the church, which lived at risk in a hostile environment. Developing the admonition of 1:9-10, "Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field," James warns against favoring the rich and against neglecting the poor. He begins by suggesting that favoritism to the wealthy cancels faith in Christ who came to us humble and lowly. Drawing on Old Testament laws that were designed to protect the poor and marginalized, James reminds his readers of the connections between wealth and oppression, poverty and victimization: by siding with the rich, they dishonor the poor among them and blaspheme God.

After reading, spend some time exploring people's responses to the text with questions such as:

- Is the direct connection that James draws between rich and poor and the explicit condemnation of favoring the rich and powerful troubling?
- In what ways do we as individuals or as a church favor people in power or people with financial resources?
- What are the risks of not showing favor to those with financial and social power?
- What are the risks of welcoming and raising up the poor?

### **Missional Merger**

This exercise is designed to bring participants into a symbolic experience that will help them explore the notions of poverty and partiality with their hearts rather than with their minds. You will need to have the items gathered and near the table ahead of time so you can move easily through this learning experience. Resist the desire to over-explain. Rather allow the exercise to unfold at a pace that suits the participants' involvement with it. Model a willingness to tolerate the awkwardness of silence. Meaning will surface as the nonnegotiable aspects of the exercise reveal themselves.

Before you begin, explain that this activity might seem unusual, but encourage participants to embrace it. Explain that it is designed to help move past all the cognitive talking and thinking and move toward responding to the issues on an emotional and, therefore, life-changing, level. Explain that the hope is that they would carry this exercise with them in the week ahead and allow it to lay the groundwork for identifying and committing to strategies for change in the next two sessions.

1. Gather the group around a table and explain that this activity is designed to help reveal our experiential and emotional understandings of poverty, disaster, and human limitations. Invite them to focus their thoughts on the symbols that you will be bringing to the table.

2. Offer a prayer for insight and openness to receive fresh understandings of the events that shaped the lives that have been so completely rearranged by hurricane Katrina.
3. Allow the group to sit in silence for a few minutes, long enough to feel uncomfortable. (This symbolizes that something is coming.)
4. Distribute a salty cracker for each participant to eat. Encourage conversation about what this might symbolize. (*nourishment, bread, bread of life, or even bread of affliction*)
5. Enter again into silence to the point of awkwardness. (This symbolizes life's way of continuing on its own way at its own pace, without human permission and irrespective of human desires.)
6. Bring out the tray of cups and distribute them in silence, allowing participants time to examine what they have received. (This symbolizes what we have against the needs we see around us.)
7. Invite participants to relieve their thirst by drinking. (This symbolizes resources being used up.)
8. Produce the glass jar or pitcher with the water and coffee grounds and explain that this is all that is available for anyone who is still thirsty. Set the pitcher at the center of the table. (This symbolizes resources inadequate for the situation.)
9. Say: "Poverty has no opportunity to embrace change. Things are as they are, and no further help is available. What can you do next? Who will listen to you? How long can you thirst on this unjust day?"
10. Allow for class discussion until near the end of class time. If no discussion follows, invite the group to sit in silence. Every minute or so, repeat the phrase, "This is the image of poverty among us."

### **Commissioning**

Close with silence or dismiss the group with the following prayer by nineteenth-century Swiss-born pastor Eugene Bersier.

You are love, and you see all suffering,  
injustice and mercy that reign in this world.  
Have pity, we implore you, on the work of your hands.  
Look mercifully on the poor, the oppressed,  
and all who are heavy laden with error, labor, and sorrow.  
Fill our hearts with deep compassion for those who suffer,  
And hasten the coming of your kingdom of justice and truth.

Amen.

Adapted from *Eerdmans Book of Famous Prayers*, compiled by Veronica Zundel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 80.

### **Sources**

Gail R. O'Day and David Peterson, eds., *The Access Bible: an Ecumenical learning Resource for People of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 355–59.

*The Learning Bible: Contemporary English Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1995), 2264–67.

Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: a Students' Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1998), 305–8.

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## Participants' Pieces

### 1. Them and Us?

One problem with responding to crises is that we tend to define our options in terms of “them and us.” This immediately sets up a sort of hierarchy in which those who have power, resources, or standing reach out (down) to “serve” those in need. While functionally it is true that *they* suffered through the hurricanes or *they* experience marginalization because of race and/or poverty, our faith in Jesus calls us to an experience of community in which when one suffers, all suffer. And when there is suffering, we are confronted with the opportunity to hear God’s voice anew and to respond to God’s dream for a community defined by truth, mercy, and justice.

The reality is that those who suffer minister to the rest of us. They bear in their lives the marks of injustice; and through that witness, if we listen, they call us to liberation and redemption—liberation from greed and false securities and redemption from the sin of participating in unjust social systems. Just as by Jesus’ stripes we are faced with our woundedness and given the opportunity to be healed, by the unjust suffering of others, we are confronted with our kinship in suffering and given the opportunity to be changed and to heal the injustice in our society.

When we respond only by pulling cash from our wallets, we are similar to a performer pulling a rabbit out of the hat. But as important as that giving is, there is no magic here. There is much behind-the-scenes work to be done. That work begins with recognizing that what happened to *them* happened to *us*. In God’s kingdom there are no “others.” Today’s session includes exercises designed to help us feel our kinship with those whose suffering has pierced our thinking. The hope is that through this emotional connection, we will set the stage for identifying and committing to strategies of change in the final two sessions of this study.

### 2. Injustice Appears in the Eye of the Storm

The following news excerpts help reveal the ways in which partiality played and continues to play a role in the suffering caused by the hurricanes.

In recent weeks, the world watched as the richest country in the world . . . opted to leave the poor, elderly and disabled to fend for themselves. Hurricane Katrina delivered a harsh reminder that millions of Americans spend their lives trapped in urban and rural slums, where middle- and upper-class citizens can ignore them—until something goes horribly wrong.

“I hope we can realize that the people of New Orleans weren’t just abandoned during the hurricane,” Sen. Barack Obama said last week. “They were abandoned long ago—to murder and mayhem in the streets, to substandard schools, to dilapidated housing, to inadequate health care, to a pervasive sense of hopelessness.”

(Source: Karin Ronnow, “Our progress on erasing poverty appears to be stalled,” *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, 20 September 2005, <http://bozemandailychronicle.com/articles/2005/09/20/features/lifestyles/02karin.txt> [accessed 28 September 2005].)

Consular authorities from Latin American countries estimate that around 300,000 people from Mexico, Central America and several South American nations live in the area affected by last week’s hurricane and the consequent flooding, which left millions of people with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

“It is very difficult for us to find and identify the Latin American victims, and to reach them with assistance. Furthermore, the U.S. State Department has so far placed restrictions on the efforts we could make,” Honduras’s ambassador to the United States, Norman Garcia, told IPS. . . . Offers of food and medical aid and logistical support made by governments in Latin American and the Caribbean have been turned down by the U.S. government.

(Source: Inter Press Service News Agency, 20 September 2005, “Thousands of Latin American Immigrants Among Katrina’s Victims,” Diego Cevallos, [www.ipsnews.news.net](http://www.ipsnews.news.net), [accessed September 25, 2005].)

Some have managed to get into shelters run by the Red Cross and Catholic Charities, which provide food and medical care, no questions asked. But when U.S. citizens in those shelters flock to cardboard tables where [federal] agents sit, Latinos stay behind watching from their cots, relief workers said. [While following 9/11, undocumented immigrants were promised they could seek federal help without fear of arrest], the Department of Homeland Security recently announced that immigrants have no immunity from deportation when providing information required to receive federal aid. That point was driven home when two [undocumented] immigrants, from Honduras and El Salvador, were taken into custody in West Virginia by state police after a military cargo plane carrying 305 evacuees arrived there September 5. . . .

The estimated 40,000 Mexicans and 150,000 Hondurans who lived in New Orleans cannot get [services including] mail delivery and temporary trailer homes.

Mario Fletes, a Honduran painter with a wife and three sons, reports, “I went to get unemployment, and they said they couldn’t process my Social Security number,” which, he insisted, is legitimate. “I went to apply for food stamps and they told me to come back in two days. I went Thursday and they told me not to come back.”

(Source: Darryl Fears, “For Illegal Immigrants, Some Aid is Too Risky,” *Washington Post*, 20 September 2005, [www.ipsnews.news.net](http://www.ipsnews.news.net) [accessed September 25, 2005].)

### **3. A Brief Synopsis of the Bible and Poverty**

#### *The Bible’s Consistent Message on Poverty*

God’s concern for the poor and the call for God’s people to care for the poor is explicit throughout the Bible:

- The Law of Moses sets up a system for preventing and redressing poverty. (See for example, Exod. 22:22–27 and Deut. 16:9–15.)
- The prophets condemned Israel for focusing on religious ritual while abusing the poor and neglecting justice, which would protect people from poverty. (See for example, Amos 5:11–13, 21–24.)
- The prophets also suggested that Israel’s leaders were punished for not caring for the poor in accordance with laws such as those found in Deuteronomy 15:1–11, in which they were commanded to forgive the debts of the poor every seven years.
- While the prophet Isaiah announced God’s promise to send an anointed one to preach good news to the poor, Jesus professed to be that very one. (See Isa. 61:1–4 and Luke 4:16–21.)
- The apostle Paul reports that the Jerusalem church, which was the center of early leadership among Christians and the site of the ongoing ministry of the apostles of Jesus, asked only one thing of him as he set out to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. That was to remember the poor. (See Gal. 11:2.)

#### *What Does the Bible Mean by Poor?*

In the Bible the following people are identified as poor:

- People whose lives are difficult (widows, orphans, aliens)

- People displaced by war
- People who didn't own property
- Those without homes
- Those who were considered of less value (non-Israelites, aliens or immigrants, women and children, and Israel's enemies)

(Adapted from "The Poor," in *The Learning Bible: Contemporary English Version* [New York: American Bible Society, 1995], 2267.)

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