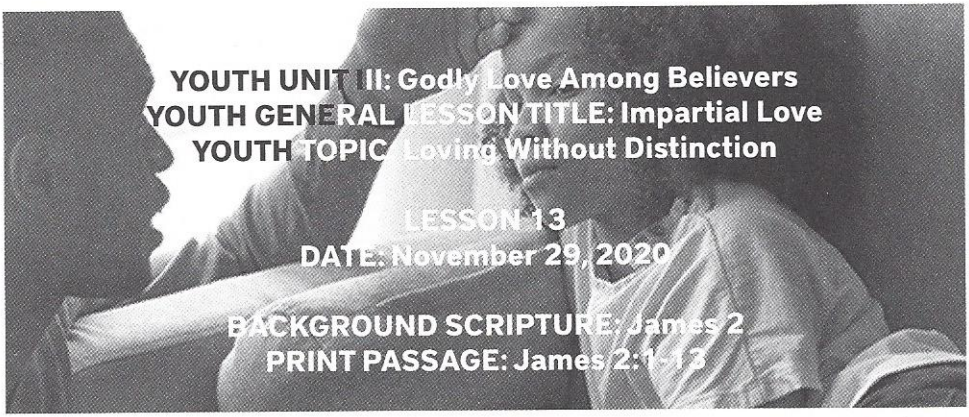
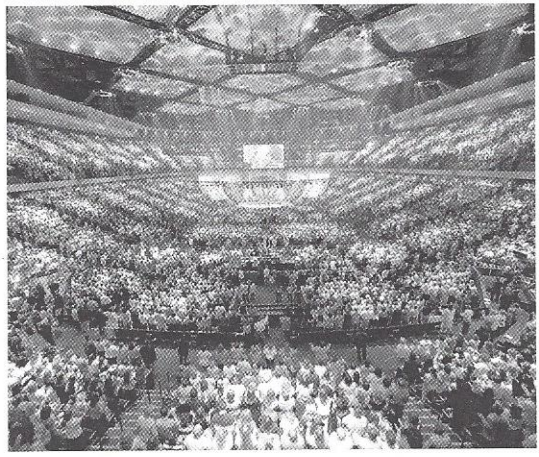


KEEPIN' IT CURRENT! (5 Minutes)

"VIPs In God's House?" – Can you believe that some churches now have a VIP section in God's House? At some megachurches there is reserved seating from "very important people" – politicians, athletes, recording artists, actors, and other celebrities. That's right, we now have VIPs in God's house.

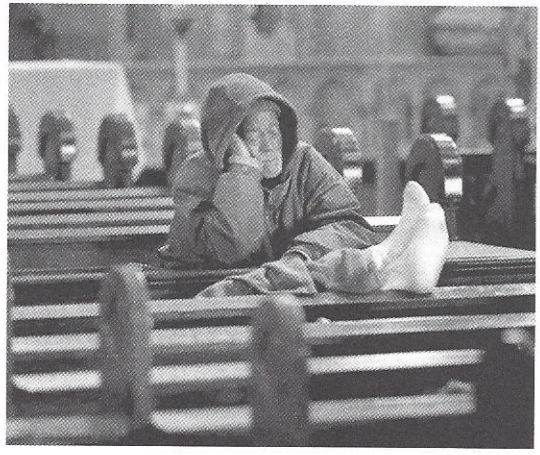
The stated rationale for reserved seating is concern about the safety of the "very important people" who are attending a worship service. Since services are open to anyone, there is always a risk that a member of the general public could engage in some action that might harm the celebrity in attendance. But, if that is the reason for the VIP section, why is the reserved seating for VIPs in the front of the sanctuary. The front of the sanctuary is not, necessarily, safer than other areas of the sanctuary. So, it would seem that this preferential treatment has more to do with the status and celebrity of the VIP than it does with concerns about their safety.



Recently, a person who attended a service at a megachurch became disgruntled and left because of the reserved VIP seats. It is on special holy days, like Christmas and Easter, when the problems with preferential treatment become more troubling. At the megachurch's Easter Sunrise service, which began at 6:30 am, members of the general public and regular church members began lining up at 4:30 am to ensure that they could get a

seat for the Sunrise service. When the doors opened at 6:00 am, one gentleman ended up with a seat in the very back of the large sanctuary even though he'd been waiting in line since 5:00 am. At 6:15 am, 15 minutes before the service started, a well-known recording artist was escorted to the VIP seating in the front. It made the man sitting in the back feel unloved by this megachurch. So, he left.

Megachurches are not the only churches that recognize VIPs in God's house. Regular churches treat people differently as well. There are family churches where members of particular families are treated as VIPs. There are wealthy churches where persons who donate more than others are treated as VIPs. And there are regular churches were officers of the church are treated as VIPs. However, from God's perspective everyone is a VIP.



Recently, a pastor dressed up like a homeless man and laid down in front of the church on a Sunday morning. The members of the church, for the most part, stepped over or around him to get into the church. No one, out of a sense of love, offered to assist the pastor in any way. In fact, several of the church's trustees asked the pastor to leave the church property, which he did. The pastor entered his study using a back door entrance. When it was time for the church's worship service to start, the pastor entered the pulpit still dressed like the homeless man he had portrayed. The congregation was shocked to learn that they had ignored and disregarded their own pastor.

The pastor's message that morning was entitled: "Everyone Is a VIP in God's House."

KEEPIN' IT REAL! (5 Minutes)

- Without naming names, who are the categories of persons in your local church who you believe are treated like VIPS, if any? Discuss how that makes you feel.

- What are some ways that your church can ensure that everyone who wor-

ships at the church or participates in a ministry activity feels as they are loved–like they are a VIP?

KEEPIN' IT BIBLICAL! (20 Minutes)

As we end Unit III, today's scriptures begin by focusing on the spiritual truth that preferences the rich over the poor, which violate the law of love. In addition, our text makes clear that refusing to help those in need reflects a hollow faith.

The *Message Bible's* translation of today's scripture lesson is entitled "The Royal Rule of Love." (Take a moment to read James 2:1-13 in the *Message Bible*.) It draws the distinction between how a man dressed in an expensive suit might be received in comparison to a "street person wearing rags" in the church. God expects those of us who are the church not to treat people differently based upon their wealth or lack thereof.

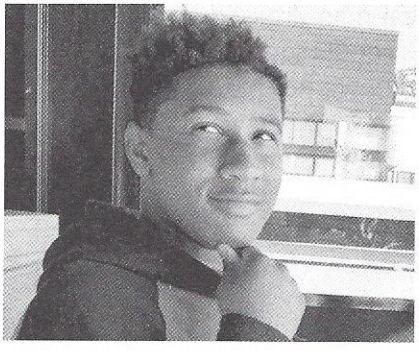
The author's indictment of the community for its "double-mindedness" reflects the ways in which the people in the faith community claim to follow the teachings of Jesus but are hypocritical at their core. In dishonoring the poor, whom Jesus declared to be blessed, by treating them with disregard but preferentially treating the wealthy (who oppress them), the community is failing to live up to its calling.

The author sets the first example of double-mindedness, mistreatment of the poor, in the context of the synagogue where the incident might have taken place during a religious observance or it might have been a civil interaction, both of which took place there. By describing their favoritism, the author indicts the community to whom the Scripture is written for being unjust judges (discriminating based on appearance of wealth or poverty).

Can you imagine a church where the important families, the big tithers, and the church officers sit in the back of the sanctuary so that visitors, small givers, and new members can sit in the front of the church? Yes, it is hard to imagine. The law of Moses mandated that landowners make provision for the poor, directed that working poor be paid immediately for their labor, and forbade judges from

discriminating between rich and poor based upon appearance. However, our human nature is to make distinctions between the "Haves and the Have Nots".

We are reminded in today's scripture that the Kingdom of God is promised to those who love God. So, here is the "Royal Rule of Love": "Love others as you love yourself." (v. 8 MSG Bible) The references to the "royal law"–a concept unique to this epistle–draws on the idea that the poor will inherit the Kingdom of God. Thus, the royal law is that which draws upon the "Kingdom of God" teachings of Jesus. Jesus' teaching prioritized love of neighbor as central to the law.



How much do you love yourself? Be honest. What are some of the things that you do because you love yourself? The same degree to which we love ourselves, take care of ourselves, provide for ourselves; God expects us to do the same for others.

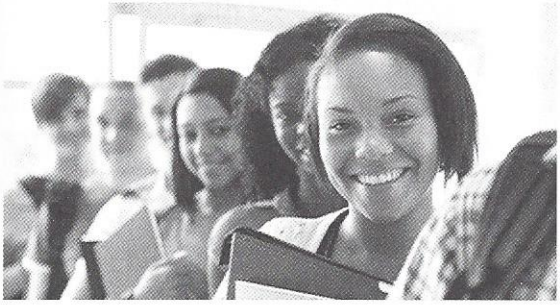
KEY VERSE: *Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? James 2:4.*

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? [2]For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, [3]and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', [4]have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? [5]Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? [6]But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? [7]Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

[8]You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' [9]But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. [10]For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. [11]For the one who said, 'You shall not commit adultery', also said, 'You shall not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. [12]So speak and so act as those who

are to be judged by the law of liberty. [13]For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement.

KEEPIN' IT TOGETHER! (5 Minutes)



Think about your school. Are there rich kids? Poor kids? Cool kids? Not so cool kids? Athletic kids? Non-athletic kids? Gifted and talented kids? Kids who are considered to be dumb?

How are kids in your school treated differently based upon how others see them? Are you guilty of treating people differently based upon how you and/or others see them? Have you ever been treated different based upon how others see you? How does that make you feel?

Do you know that God looks at your hearts, not your outward appearance? ("But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." 1 Samuel 16:7 NRSV) Like God, we are expected to look at people's hearts, not at their wealth, intelligence, athleticism, coolness, etc.

No one is perfect. Our hearts require the love of Jesus Christ to cover the sin that is within. So, it becomes our challenge to pray for a heart like Jesus so that we can treat everyone the same.

iTHINK! (5 Minutes)

- Provide youth with sidewalk chalk to write words of welcome and encouragement on the sidewalks around the church building. While you're working, discuss ways to put the words of welcome into action by inviting and genuinely befriending people in the neighborhood.

- Reflect on contexts where discrimination is taking place locally. Consider the role of privilege in these situations. Invite a speaker to share about privilege and the ways it impacts discriminatory actions. Discuss this phrase: "I don't know what I don't know." Ask: how might I be blind to the impact of my actions on others?