

Lesson 11 / November 15, 2020

# The Experiment

By RLD Editorial Team

for use as  
STEP 1

## Lesson 11

**Focus:**

Don't show favoritism.

## Lesson 11

**Bible Basis:**James 2:1-9;  
Psalm 82:2-4

## Lesson 11

**Memory Verse:**Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold  
the cause of the poor and oppressed.  
—Psalm 82:3

**Students will be confronted with the reality that all human beings are created equal, regardless of their social standing.**

**Materials:**
 None

In 1971, a Stanford professor named Philip Zimbardo had an idea for a unique psychological experiment. He decided to create a fake prison in a university building, and he recruited college students to act as guards and prisoners. The goal was to document the effects of life behind bars.

Maybe you've heard of this study before; it's so famous that people just call it the "Stanford Prison Experiment"—you may have even discussed it in classes at school. The thing about the Stanford Prison Experiment is that it didn't become well-known because it was successful. It got famous by turning into a disaster.

The study was supposed to run for two weeks, but it was called off after only six days when Professor Zimbardo realized that things had gotten out of hand. During the experiment, at least one student "prisoner" suffered something like a nervous breakdown. Many of the other "inmates" started to act in strange ways—more like real criminals and less like college students. Some of the "guards" became downright abusive. Professor Zimbardo discovered himself acting more like a prison official than a professor.

When the experiment began, all of the guards and inmates were the same—they were ordinary college students. They weren't crazy. They weren't criminals. They didn't appear to be unusual in any way. But when the researchers chose half of the students to be guards and others to be prisoners, they were essentially saying that some of them were better than others. And that's when the trouble started.

**According to an article published by Stanford in their Alumni magazine:**

"Zimbardo encouraged the guards to think of themselves as actual guards in a real prison. He made clear that prisoners could not be physically harmed, but said the guards should try to create an atmosphere in which the prisoners felt 'powerless.'"

“...For six days, half the study's participants endured cruel and dehumanizing abuse at the hands of their peers. At various times, they were taunted, stripped naked, deprived of sleep and forced to use plastic buckets as toilets. Some of them rebelled violently; others became hysterical or withdrew into despair. As the situation descended into chaos, the researchers stood by and watched—until one of their colleagues finally spoke out.”

“Zimbardo says that ‘neither they nor we could have imagined’ that the guards would treat the prisoners so inhumanely. The Stanford Prison Experiment...provided lessons in how good people placed in adverse conditions can act barbarically.”

➤ **If you had signed up for this experiment, would you have wanted to be a guard or a prisoner? Why?** (Most of your students would probably prefer to be guards—they were the ones in control.)

➤ **How do you think you would have reacted in either of those roles?** (Answers will vary.)

➤ **Why do you think the “guards” let their behavior get out of hand? Why do you think the “prisoners” took the abuse instead of quitting? Remember, although they were intimidated to think they were held captive, they weren’t real inmates—they could leave!** (Maybe some of the “guards” enjoyed the power trip. Others were probably just trying to keep their “prisoners” in line. Some of the “inmates” may have genuinely felt trapped as the line between experiment and reality began to blur. Others might not have wanted to be labeled “quitters,” or didn’t want to give up the money [students were paid for participating in the experiment]).

➤ **What can the experiment teach us about the dangers of treating some people like they’re better than others?** (In only six days, the “prisoners” and “guards” in the Stanford Prison Experiment both began to act in alarming ways. The “guards” became abusive and controlling while the “prisoners” became frightened and helpless. When we act like some people are better than others in real life, we’re influencing them in similarly powerful and disturbing ways.)

**Thankfully, none of us live inside a prison experiment. But playing favorites in real life is still a bad idea. All of us are created in the image of God, which means all human beings are equal at the deepest level. When we act like some individuals are better than others, the results are never good. That truth was recognized thousands of years before the Stanford Prison Experiment by the authors of the Bible. Let’s see what they wrote about playing favorites.**

Additional resources:

The Menace Within

[https://alumni.stanford.edu/get/page/magazine/article/?article\\_id=40741](https://alumni.stanford.edu/get/page/magazine/article/?article_id=40741)

(Continue on to Steps 2 and 3 in your teacher’s guide; your Step 4 appears below.)

# The Experiment

for use as  
**STEP 4** 

**Lesson 11****Focus:**

Don't show favoritism.

**Lesson 11****Bible Basis:**

James 2:1-9;  
Psalm 82:2-4

**Lesson 11****Memory Verse:**

Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold  
the cause of the poor and oppressed.  
—Psalm 82:3

**Materials:**

- Pens/pencils (1 per student)
- Index cards (1 per student)

If your class is meeting online, have teens come to class with index cards and pens/pencils.

**The Stanford Prison Experiment is an extreme example of what can happen when people play favorites. Ordinary college students began to act like big, powerful, controlling prison guards . . . or weak, powerless, desperate prisoners. The only difference was whether the researchers said that they were supposed to be treated as more or less important.**

**In real life, playing favorites can have a similar impact. If we treat someone as *more* important than others, they may start to act prideful or controlling. If we treat someone as *less* important, they may become weak or helpless.**

➤ **Why do you think people start to live up to the way they're treated by others? For example, if someone is treated as weak or helpless, why might they actually become weak or helpless? (Accept all reasonable answers.)**

**The best solution is for us to treat everyone like they're equal. But of course, that's easier said than done. There's something about human beings that makes us want to classify people—and of course, to ultimately decide we're better than them.**

Hand out index cards and pens/pencils to your teens. If your class is meeting online, invite teens to have their cards and pens/pencils ready.

**Today, let's make a plan for how you're going to treat someone as an equal this week. But here's the hard part—I want you to choose someone you've treated poorly in the past.**

**First, think of a person that you've treated as worse than you this week. It's hard for us to admit it, but we've all done it. Maybe it was a homeless guy asking for money. Maybe it was an annoying kid at school you wish would leave you alone. Maybe it was your mom or dad, and you decided to treat them poorly because they wouldn't give you what you wanted.**

Have your teens decide on a person and write that person's initials really big on the left side of your paper.

**Now, write *your* initials on the right side of the paper, and draw an equal sign between them. That's a reminder that this person isn't less of a human being than you—you're both equal because you were made by God.** As an encouragement, be sure your teens know that you are completing the same assignment.

**Finally, add one more thing to the paper. Write down something you can do to show this person that you regard them as equal. It could be anything from giving a compliment to hanging out with them to helping them solve a problem.** Give your students a minute or two to decide upon an "equality action" and write it down.

➤ **Would anyone be willing to share what you're planning to do to demonstrate you're equal to the person you selected?** (Encourage, but don't require, your students to talk briefly about their plans. Read what you wrote on your own equality plan to let students know this is a safe place to share.)

**This week, go out of your way to treat the person you wrote down as an equal! For starters, be sure to perform the act of kindness you wrote down. The Stanford Prison Experiment proved that when you play favorites, you can do serious harm to people. Use *your* actions to prove that when you treat others as equals, you can do serious good!**

Close in prayer.

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