

James Shepherd

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[0 : 00] Don't judge a book by its cover. This is what my primary school teacher in my class told me time and time again every time we had a library lesson.

Does anyone remember library lessons back in primary school? You have like one morning every single week and we would go to the library to read a book. Our teacher would read a book to us, a classic children's book, and she would encourage us to read it together and tell us how great this book was and the importance of not judging a book by its cover.

My teacher constantly hammered this idea to us as kids, as children, because she said that it was important that we realise that what's important is the content of a book, not its cover.

You can't judge a book or base a book on its cover. It has to be on its content. Now this didn't really work for me. I always judged a book by its cover because I hated reading.

So anything with words in it didn't really work for me. And so to me, if a book's cover was very exciting and very colourful, plus if it was very big, it most likely meant this book had less words and more pictures.

[1 : 15] See, I didn't mind books with lots of pictures in them. It was just the words I didn't like. And so whilst my primary school teacher is telling me and telling our class about books and about the importance of reading a book, not judging it by its cover, I'm eyeing off the Where's Wally book in the shelf across from her and looking forward to reading it because Where's Wally was a fantastic cover, very exciting, very colourful, and also it was very big.

So, you know, put the four of them together, a big book, exciting cover, most likely not many words. And in this case, no words in Where's Wally, and just pictures. It was fantastic. And so I would go and borrow the book after class, after reading with the teacher, and my teacher would come up to me and go, oh, again, James, with the Where's Wally.

Far out. When are you going to learn? And that's where I told her, don't judge a book by its cover, okay? This phrase, don't judge a book by its cover, is not just one we use in regards to books.

It's a lesson that we learn as children growing up in regards to many areas of our life. We're taught to not judge something based off its appearance, that therefore we should give people a chance and that we should give jobs a go and give that sport a try.

We're taught not to make judgments off the appearance, but to actually see for itself and explore for itself if it's worth it by the content. But being taught to think this way is one thing.

[2 : 46] The question is, do we actually live in a world that practices this idea where we don't judge a book by its cover, but by its content? We don't judge something on its appearance, but by our experience and our exploration into what it is.

I'm not sure if we do. And I think, and I imagine most of you would agree with me. You don't need to look very far to see this. I mean, most glossy magazines have story after story about how to lose the most weight the fastest, what celebrity look will look best for you this summer, how to get that bikini body ready for summer, how to get those ripped abs in four weeks, how to grow that perfect beard, which I am beginning to perfect, as you can see.

You don't see many articles on how to shed greed in 10 weeks or 10 easy steps, how to become a man of integrity in four weeks, the top 10 secret tips celebrities don't want you to know about to become a more compassionate and patient person.

The world is not interested in the content of a person's character. What matters to the world is a person's image. We might exist in the world that teaches children not to judge a book by its cover, but the reality is our children are growing up in a world that teaches them the exact opposite.

We are in the middle of a series titled The End of Hypocrisy, a series going through the book of James as he deals with one of the most prominent issues in Christianity, hypocrisy.

[4 : 24] James writes his letter to believers scattered across the world because he is convicted that the gospel message impacts us in a profound way, that when someone is confronted with the resurrected Lord Jesus as he was, it changes everything and transforms our lives forever.

And here in chapter 2, we once again are confronted with this reality. It reads in verse 1, Glorious is the key word here.

Whenever in the New Testament someone speaks of Jesus' glory, most of the time they are referring to his resurrected state. When Jesus was on the Emmaus Road, he meets two people and he walks with them, and he says to them, did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?

Talking about his resurrection. Paul, in Philippians 3, describes Jesus' resurrection body as literally the body of glory.

And so James is making the point explicitly that no one who holds faith in the resurrected Lord Jesus, no one who has been impacted by the resurrection of Jesus, the glorious Lord Jesus, shows favoritism or judges a book by its cover.

[5 : 57] James provides us with a corrective saying those who have been impacted by the resurrection don't show favoritism. Those who have been saved by grace have been enabled by God's Spirit to live the life God has called them to live.

The whole point of this chapter is to point towards the fact that people who have been saved by grace, people who have been impacted in a profound way by the gospel, by the resurrection of Jesus, do not show favoritism.

So as we look at this, let's now dive into the text and see how James unpacks this idea. First, he sets up a scene in verses 2 and 3.

I'll read it out for us. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, here's a good seat for you, but say to the poor man, you stand there or sit on the floor by my feet, have you not discriminate among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

James provides an example of favoritism that might take place in the local gathering. Believers here are measuring people based off their appearance and social status.

[7 : 19] They are judging a book by its cover, not its content. They are drawn to those with money, with social power, and are indifferent or even repulsed by those who walk into the meeting wearing rags and filthy clothes.

What we have here in this example of religion is a live example of religion that is totally opposite to that of James 1.27, which says, The believers in the example here have obviously failed at this. They have neglected the poor, the widow, the orphan, and decided to show favoritism towards the rich and wealthy who look like they can contribute to their church more beneficially.

In so doing, they've shown and proven that they are polluted by the world's influences, that their church has become worldly instead of godly, instead of being impacted by the resurrection of Jesus.

He, James, describes a church that has become polluted, whose religion is worthless and unacceptable. It is contradictory to a faith that is in the Lord Jesus, the glorious Lord Jesus.

[8 : 51] And so he concludes in verse 4, Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? For James, you really can't get worse than this.

Being a church that treats the poor and outcast with disdain in order to keep the rich and powerful happy is considered evil.

To measure someone's wealth and value when the church has been bought with the precious blood of Christ, which we are told in 1 Peter, is more precious than gold or any material thing, is evil.

It is sickening. And no doubt, this problem exists in the church today. The moment we see someone among us who is a bit awkward, a bit odd, and we avoid them, in that moment, we've become judges with evil thoughts.

People who have been polluted by the world. The moment we see someone who looks really nice, maybe quite attractive, someone who looks competent socially, whether new or not, and we make an effort to serve them and to meet their needs over and above the other person who's awkward, in that moment, we become judges with evil thoughts.

[10:15] We've become polluted by the world. It's a strong conclusion to make about us. Because we might do this every single time we meet.

And the conclusion James is making out is that if you do this, if you're showing discrimination amongst the poor and the rich, then you've become a judge with evil thoughts.

James responds to this scene in two ways. To help us see how favoritism does not belong in the place of those who have been impacted by the resurrection.

He points out, he does this in two ways. He firstly points out the irony of the whole situation and then he points out the hypocrisy in a much broader way. So firstly, the irony.

Verse 5 says this, Listen, my dear brothers and sisters, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who loved him?

[11:23] But you have dishonored the poor. It's not the rich who are exploiting you. Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

James firstly points out the way God views the poor and if he wasn't clear enough back in chapter 1, he is very clear here. God has chosen the poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith. He has saved them so they can enjoy a relationship with him forever. And he has chosen them out of the world to have that privilege.

We can note a couple of things here. Number one, poor people becoming Christians is evidence of God's big heart for them.

No one can come to saving faith on their own. And indeed, in a worldly sense, if anyone is so unable to save or help themselves, it's the poor. And so therefore, God choosing to save them shows his profound care and love for the poor.

[12:35] Number two, he points out the measure of one's true wealth. That it's not in material things. But as we saw back in chapter 1, when we are impacted by gospel wisdom, we see that true value and true wealth is found in faith.

It's found in eternal, heavenly things, not material, temporary things. And we are told here, the poor are now considered to be rich in these heavenly things.

That is, rich in faith. James is pointing out the ironic and tragic reality that believers of the glorious Lord Jesus Christ would show favour towards the rich and dishonour the poor.

It's ironic that we could have a faith in a Lord and Saviour who is immeasurably more valuable and glorious than us, who indeed is the one who gives us value by shedding his blood for us.

And yet, we show favouritism. How dare we make ourselves judge and decide who is valuable and who isn't when the judge himself was the one who died for us not showing fairitism that we would know our true value, that we would be saved.

[14:01] How dare we decide that we are judges? And the tragic irony continues. It gets worse. Verses 6-7, focusing on how the rich respond.

Is not the rich who are exploiting you and the ones who are dragging you into court, are they not the ones who are blaspheming in the noble name of him to whom you belong?

When we act in a worldly way, judging people by a worldly standard, we should expect worldly consequences.

The rich here in James' time were worldly. These aren't necessarily rich Christians. These are rich people who are not transformed by the gospel and the wisdom of the gospel.

They thought of themselves very highly because of their wealth. They felt entitled. They did whatever they wanted, being motivated by their wealth.

[14:57] And the thing is, the believers here in the letter of James, presumably poor believers, perpetuated this idea of their importance, of their entitlement. by favouring the rich and powerful, they treated them in the same way the rest of the world treats them.

They sucked up to them. They gave them whatever they wanted. And therefore, it invited upon themselves the same kind of treatment the rich gives to the rest of the world and to the poor.

And so, pointing out this irony, James is pretty much saying, stop favouring those who are making your life difficult.

Stop treating people on a worldly scale. It's doing you no good. Look, the poor are left uncared for and unloved and the rich are exploiting you.

They're blaspheming the very God that you worship. it's not working. It can be tempting for us as a church to not see this, to miss the irony where we can favour the rich and influential people in very inconspicuous ways.

[16:15] Rich people, being the ones with money, are able to fund all kinds of different ministries, ensure the staff are paid and contribute to building projects.

And so it's tempting to think, at least I think, that we might want to ensure that these people who could have a very significant influence on our church to ensure that they are happy and they are content and they are getting what they want.

But at what cost do we do this? Do we neglect those who don't have as much influence or money? Who are really able to contribute in any kind of significant way to church life?

To do that is favouritism. And as James concluded, it's evil. It's evil.

It's hard being up here to talk about this stuff. It's full on. And I don't want you guys to leave here today thinking that being rich is evil or being rich is sinful.

[17:23] James is not necessarily having a go at rich people at all. But in showing the irony of favouritism, James challenges us that we as a church must perpetuate a worldview that is based on faith in our glorious resurrected Saviour, Jesus Christ, that helps both the poor and the rich to see that in Jesus they are rich in faith and enjoy every blessing that comes from Him.

Receiving every blessing in Him which is worth way more than the world could ever offer us. And when we do that, the poor are embraced, loved, and cared for.

They receive dignity and value that is theirs in Christ which the world would otherwise try and rob them of. and the rich when they are impacted by the wisdom of the gospel, when they are impacted by the resurrection of Jesus are able to humbly serve and be generous with what they have.

Not as a measure of how great they are or how important they are to our church here, but as a measure of how gracious God has been to them to enable them to live in such a generous way.

James' first response is to point out the irony that showing favouritism is not achieving for them what they had wanted or had hoped.

[18:56] And his second response points again to this scene pointing out and highlighting even further the hypocrisy behind showing favouritism and again to show us that it ought not to belong this favouritism it ought not to belong as part of our lives as part of people's lives who are impacted by the wisdom of the gospel who have been impacted by the resurrection of Jesus.

So verse 8 James points the believers towards the royal law of scripture which every single Jewish or even non-Jewish believer would have known especially because it received its royal status from Jesus himself who tied it with as one of the most important commandments that all the law and the prophets hang off.

This is a pretty big commandment. However in showing favouritism we break that commandment. It contradicts that very law that these people and we might so very passionately and zealously hold to.

And so James points out the blatant hypocrisy with this one law. You cannot say that you love your neighbor as yourself and then show favouritism.

That is hypocritical. To do so is to break it. And therefore in doing so we become a lawbreaker. And as James shows by breaking this one law we become accountable to all of it.

[20:44] Verse 10 whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. If we defy God in one point of the law then we've broken the whole law.

Saying that it's just one law how much harm can be done breaking just one law is to totally disregard the God that we serve who is behind the law.

You see the law is not just a list of rules or it's a way of life given by the grace of God when the people of God came out of Egypt he gave them the law that they might dwell with him and he with them in the land to live in prosperity and to live faithfully serving him.

And so to break one part of it is to compromise that entire life that God has given them to enjoy. It's to reject that life that God wants for them.

That is the purpose behind the law given. It's not just a list of rules. And so if this is the case always with the law how much more does this apply to the royal law of scripture?

[21:58] If we show favouritism we are not only breaking just one command but all of the law and indeed if we are breaking not just any particular law but the very royal law of scripture that the whole law of prophets hang off in short what James is then saying is that if we say we love our neighbor

as ourselves but in our actions don't show it in our actions show favoritism then we've missed the entire point of scripture.

we've missed the very work that Jesus did for us on the cross where he chose not to show favoritism and died for all people that we all might come to know him.

This calls a serious reflection on our part as a church. James says showing favoritism is evil.

It's a tough message to hear. When we show favoritism towards one another we stink of hypocrisy as we engage in a worldly and unbiblical and unlawful act.

It's totally opposite to being impacted by the divine and heavenly gospel by the resurrection of Jesus. It just doesn't belong in those people's lives.

[23 : 55] James responds to the issue of favoritism by showing its irony and its hypocrisy. He does this again as I'll keep repeating to show us that it has no place in the lives of those who have been impacted by Jesus' resurrection.

That is something we're going to keep drumming in this series. It's the resurrection of Jesus that impacts the way we live in a profound way and that's the reason why hypocrisy ought to not be existent in people's lives.

In verses 12 to 13 he informs us how we should live in light of this issue. How we should begin to live in regards to responding to our hypocrisy.

He says in verse 12 Verse 12 is a humbling reminder pointing us forward to the end time coming when we will all be judged our actions weighed and measured.

The point is to be careful as we speak and act that we should do so knowing that we are under the law of liberty lest we should speak and act like judges with evil thoughts showing favoritism.

[25 : 19] Now this isn't to say that our salvation is in the balance depending on our actions. As we looked at in the very first week chapter 1 new birth in Christ salvation that is found in Jesus is the most perfect gift that has come from above.

It's been given to us freely by God and so our salvation is not dependent upon our works and what we can do but it's dependent upon God's gracious gift to us.

And the thing is that's exactly what James wants us to have in mind when we read this phrase the law of liberty. You see it's the law of God as it is reinterpreted by Christ.

It's not the same law that we see in the Old Testament the one that Moses gave in the Mosaic law. We are not under that law. We're under none of it.

We are under the law of liberty which in practice might look very similar to the Mosaic law, to the Old Testament law, but in reality it's a completely different law, a new covenant but with one major difference.

[26 : 31] Whilst the Mosaic law was a standard by which we had to live by, we had to meet, otherwise we'd be condemned, the law of liberty has already had its standard met in Christ.

And it's in him we now enjoy the ability by God's spirit to serve and to love those around us no matter who they are. As one particular commentator put it, no longer is God's law a threatening and confining burden for the will of God now confronts us as a law of liberty, an obligation we discharge from the joyful knowledge that God has both liberated us from the penalty of sin and given us in his spirit the power to obey his will.

Again, as we keep coming back in this series, James' purpose is to implore us to live in response to the resurrection of Jesus, to live lives that are genuine with our speech and our actions.

As he points out the hypocrisy he sees in this church, indeed in our own church, he is not doing it to condemn us, to drum fear into us. And that's not why I'm here preaching tonight, to drum fear into us.

James writes his letter and we preach this message that we might truly live lives that reflect the glory of Christ whom we hold faith to, that we wouldn't cheapen our faith by showing favoritism towards those who are rich and neglecting those who are poor.

[28 : 09] That we wouldn't cheapen our salvation and the life that we have, but that we would live it to the fullest, enjoying what God has given us by honoring him and serving those who come into our meeting together.

favoritism. And this means rooting out favoritism. This means realizing that some of us here need to learn to love those around us who are pretty hard to love, who aren't really cool, who are a bit awkward, who may be of no advantage to you, but the reality is we need to learn to love these people.

people. And this can be really hard to do. Which is why what is central to this is an understanding of what is at the heart of this law of liberty, what is at the heart of our new life in Christ as we are impacted by the resurrection of Jesus.

At the heart of it is mercy. mercy triumphs over judgment.

At the center of our life as believers is mercy. Life under the law of liberty is one of mercy. James here is reflecting on what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount where he says, blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.

[29 : 43] And here he's turning it around making it into a warning by saying that those who don't show mercy to one another will be shown no mercy from God. This is what makes the issue of favoritism such an issue.

The fact that it's merciless. It's totally contradictive to the life lived under the law. A life which has mercy at the very center of it.

Favoritism gets rid of that idea. When we show favoritism towards one another, we are stripping away the mercy that rightly belongs to each of us in Christ.

We cast judgment over the person instead of embracing them as our brother and sister. And so here James warns us to be merciful in all our actions and speech lest we end up like a judge with evil thoughts.

For mercy always triumphs, always boasts over judgment. It's a bit of a strange phrase. It's hard to know what it exactly can mean.

[30 : 52] I think it's trying to say that those who show mercy in this life show that they are true recipients of God's grace. Mercy, as we begin to show it in our speech and our actions, is the evidence that we are God's people, that we are different to the rest of the world.

And it's the antidote to the hypocrisy of favoritism that we might otherwise show instead. When we show mercy to each other, judgment loses its power.

Our church ought not to be known as a church of favoritism, whether rich and influential, whether socially competent and beautiful people are welcomed over and above those who are a bit awkward, not very socially competent, who are poor and otherwise can't contribute anything to our church.

No, we want to be a church who shows mercy and mercy to all people, to rich and to poor. No matter who walks into this building, we want to show them mercy and show the mercy that God has shown us in His Son.

We want to put on display a faith that has been deeply impacted by the resurrection of Jesus where we display the true wisdom of the gospel, which shows both the rich and the poor that being rich in faith is of far greater value.

[32 : 20] We want to be so unlike the world who shows patriotism, who rejects people and accepts them off their image and what they can contribute. We want to accept all people, knowing that we ourselves have fallen short of God's standard, that none of us can contribute in any meaningful way, no matter how rich we might think we are, or how important we might think we are, that we all need to experience the wonderful mercy of God.

That is the church we want to be. That is a church that shows that it has been impacted by the resurrection of Jesus.

The question is, are we that church? And what needs to be done to become that church?