

Love

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- [0 : 0 0] Now, I think I've said before that I enjoy reading biographies. It could be influential theologians and pastors throughout church history.
- It could be world leaders. It could be famous authors or popular musicians. Well, I don't know whether I should admit this or not, but I was on vacation recently, and I saw a Michael Jackson impersonator perform.
- And I thought to myself, you know, I've never read a Michael Jackson biography. I don't necessarily have any special interest in him. I'm not a huge Michael Jackson fan. But now that I think about it, I have some questions.
- So I got curious, and I got a biography, and I began reading it. Well, just as I thought, he was a very strange man.
- But here's why I mention it. Everyone knew he was a strange man. At the height of his popularity, the media and the tabloids never stopped reminding the public just how strange he was.
- [1 : 0 6] He has a pet monkey. His best friends seem to be children. He's undergone his umpteenth plastic surgery. His skin color is different every day.
- He's dangling his infant son from a balcony in Germany. He and Paul McCartney are good friends. No, wait a minute. They're not good friends. He just bought out the entire Beatles catalog out from underneath him.
- He's a Christian. No. He's a Jehovah's Witness. No. He might actually be a Muslim now. He's rich. No. He's broke and in major debt.
- He's addicted to painkillers. He's overdosed on painkillers. He's married. No. Wait. He's divorced. No.
- He's married again to Elvis' daughter. No. He's divorced again. He's on trial for some very terrible charges of child molestation. The public knew all of these things.
- [2 : 0 6] And yet he remained one of the best-selling artists of all time. Promoters paid him tens of millions of dollars to show up and perform, sometimes at a single concert.
- Why? Because they knew they could pack stadiums of people clamoring to see him. And then they could air that concert on TV and millions more would watch.
- And then they could package it up in a video and people would rush to the music store to buy the video. People loved Michael Jackson and for decades couldn't get enough of him.
- There were times when he would sneak away on vacation only to discover throngs of people already surrounding the place where he was staying. Entire police departments had to be stationed outside of the building.
- You've probably seen footage of women screaming in his presence. Some of them simply fainted because they were in the presence of the great Michael Jackson. Some of you probably remember this happening with the Beatles or with Elvis.

[3 : 07] I think these days, I don't know, Taylor Swift might elicit a similar response, similar kind of madness in people. But Michael Jackson stands out to me because he was such a strange and controversial guy, and yet people went absolutely crazy over him.

But of course, there is nothing new under the sun. We have always been drawn to attractive or wealthy or powerful people.

The only real curious thing in our day is that we seem to be drawn to famous people who are famous only because they're famous. Think of social media influencers or the Kardashians.

We don't even know why they're celebrities. But millions of people are still attracted to them. Millions of people still follow them. I mean, at least Michael Jackson could sing and dance. Well, as I've read about the countless people who practically worshipped men like Michael Jackson, I couldn't help but think about our Lord Jesus Christ.

I suppose he had his moments of fanfare, but here's the summary the Apostle John gives us. He was in the world, and the world was created through him, and yet the world did not recognize him.

[4 : 34] He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. In John chapter 6, thousands upon thousands of people flocked to Christ.

In fact, even after he left them and he crossed the sea to the other side, they followed him all the way around. They were so enamored with him that they wanted to take him by force and make him king.

But before they could, Jesus wanted them to understand who he truly was. And he said, I am the bread of life.

No one who comes to me will ever be hungry, and no one who believes in me will ever be thirsty again. And you would have thought that message would have made him even more attractive to people.

I mean, what ordinary king can guarantee that you will never be hungry or thirsty again? The rich and powerful in this world, they've been talking about eradicating hunger for a long time, but really not much has changed.

[5 : 41] Well, Jesus continued explaining himself, and by the end, we're told from that moment, many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.

Michael Jackson, he couldn't offer anything, more than a few pop songs, some impressive dance moves, yet fans would not abandon him for anything.

Complete strangers stood outside of the courtroom as he was on trial. But when the God of glory came in the flesh to rescue us from eternal damnation and give us life everlasting, nearly everyone shrugged him off.

When he healed the sick, when he restored sight to the blind, and even raised the dead, they plotted to kill him. Something's upside down about this.

Well, of course, we're studying the book of James in the New Testament. And by now, you may be wondering what Michael Jackson and celebrities have to do with anything.

[6 : 46] Well, here's what James writes at the start of James chapter 2. My brothers, do not show favoritism as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

J.B. Phillips offers a helpful paraphrase. He says, Don't ever attempt, my brothers, to combine the snobbery, combine snobbery with faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

The two don't go together. They don't mix. In his book, Radically Whole, David Gibson frames this issue as a matter of glory. He says, As God has made us glory-hungry creatures, we're drawn to it.

So whether it's a celebrity, or winning the championship game, or a breathtaking view at the top of a mountain, our hearts tend to be attracted to glory, for better or worse.

Gibson writes, James' basic assumption, as he writes this part of his letter, is that we are wired to love glory. In everyday life, we speak, act, think, and make decisions in hundreds of ways that reflect our heart's attraction to glory.

[8 : 05] And we see it in the things that we love. We see it in the way that we judge. But as we've discussed, James sees some pretty troubling inconsistencies in the church.

We are called to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our strength, and with all our soul. That's singular devotion to him.

But even worse than what we might call a half-hearted love, James says we may have a divided love. And that's in part what he means when he refers to the double-minded person.

You see, the double-minded person is attempting to go in two opposite directions at the same time. He claims to love God. That is, the double-minded person claims to love God, but he clearly loves the world.

In James 4, James writes, Don't you know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? The double-minded person also claims to have wisdom.

[9 : 12] You know, making judgments according to a God-given standard, according to his word. But his judgments are proving altogether worldly. In chapter 2 here, in verse 4, James says, Haven't you made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

I suppose before I go any further, I should read the text. If you want to follow along, go with me to James chapter 1. I'll read James 1.26 through James 2.13.

And as you'll see, this is one of those places where we have an unfortunate chapter break. Frankly, James is one of those books that's just really hard to know where best to divide it. So if you're going to divide it, you have to do it somewhere.

But let's read part of chapter 1. Here's what it says. My brothers, do not show favoritism as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

For if someone comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor person dressed in filthy clothes also comes in, if you look with favor on the one wearing the fine clothes and say, sit here in a good place, and yet you say to the poor person, stand over there, or sit here on the floor by my footstool, haven't you made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

[10 : 58] Listen, my dear brothers. Didn't God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

Yet you have dishonored the poor. Don't the rich oppress you and drag you into court? Don't they blaspheme the good name that was invoked over you? Indeed, if you fulfill the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well.

If, however, you show favoritism, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the entire law yet stumbles at one point is guilty of breaking it all.

For he who said, do not commit adultery, also said, do not murder. So if you do not commit adultery, but you murder, you are a lawbreaker. Speak and act as those who are to be judged by the law of freedom.

For judgment is without mercy to the one who has not shown mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. So we are a glory-seeking people.

[12 : 10] Specifically, in the context of what James is writing about, we are naturally drawn to the glory of people, the rich, the famous perhaps, the powerful.

But James says our pursuit of glory in people can be very twisted, very corrupted. Our love is misplaced, and as a result, our judgments about people are short-sighted, to say the very least, about it.

Imagine arriving at church next Sunday, only to find every seat has been reserved for different groups of people. The first rows are for people who earn \$100,000 or more a year.

The next rows are for those who earn \$75,000 or more. The next rows, \$50,000 or more. The more money you make, the better seats you get.

Or let's say someone stands at the door, and they watch you as you come in. You know, maybe he glances out and looks at the car you drive. He looks at your clothing.

[13 : 17] Maybe he observes the way you carry yourself as you approach. Maybe he says, so, you know, tell me a little bit about yourself. What do you do for a living? Where do your kids go to school?

What are your hobbies? And then he takes all of that information, and he makes a determination about which group you belong to, and then he escorts you in and seats you accordingly.

I think we would all find something deeply unsettling about that, especially in the context of the Christian church. But to some degree, that's precisely what James sees happening.

I don't think the seats were marked. I don't think they had someone standing at the door grouping people by class or race or anything else, but he accuses these Christians of showing favoritism.

Now, James probably intends for this to be hypothetical or at least exaggerated, but he's trying to capture the spirit of what they are doing when he compares how they treat a wealthy person versus a poor person.

[14 : 25] As subtle as it may be, James sees their tendency to treat people differently, and that's the issue here. Verse 1, they are showing favoritism. Verse 4, they are making distinctions from one person to the next.

In other words, they are looking at the glory of a person or the lack thereof and treating them accordingly. To the wealthy, you know, they smile wide, they open their arms, they say, hello, brother, great to see you, please come sit with me.

But to the poor, they say, oh, hey, there's probably a seat back there somewhere. Help yourself. And I think if we're honest with ourselves, we can admit that we all think this way at times.

As it happens, our love is often conditional, but it's not even conditioned upon how people treat us necessarily. Sadly, our love can be conditional upon a person's mere appearance.

I remember reading about an experiment where a man dressed in a black overcoat asked people for money in New York City.

[15 : 35] He claimed he had lost his wallet and he just needed a few dollars for a taxi. But as he continued the experiment, he would occasionally change from the black overcoat to a brown one.

And strangely enough, what he found was that he received more money from more people when he wore the brown coat. Now, obviously, that doesn't make any sense at all.

What rational reason could there be for someone being more generous or more people being generous to someone wearing a brown coat versus someone wearing a black coat?

Well, there isn't a sound reason for it. It doesn't make any sense at all. But even without thinking, we make these kinds of judgments all the time. And James says, don't you see what you're doing?

You're determining your love, your loyalty, who's worth your time and attention, by outward, superficial, meaningless distinctions.

[16 : 37] Now, this problem, especially as it pertains to the poor and the rich, would have been a bit more obvious, I think, in the first century because the middle class didn't really exist.

You didn't have a bunch of people in the middle. For all practical purposes, you had the rich and you had the poor. And there was a pretty clear distinction between the two groups. In our day, we can certainly be guilty of this kind of snobbery, as J.B. Phillips phrased it.

But favoritism comes in all shapes and sizes. I once had a pastor confess to me that they intentionally built their new church building in a wealthy neighborhood to attract wealthy people.

Of course, he claimed they were only interested in wealthy people because those people could more easily support their various ministries throughout the world. In another case, a deacon at a church told me explicitly that he would never let a black person join the church.

And he cited not racism, but irreconcilable cultural differences. It would never work, he said. We're just too different. At my former church, we instituted a fellowship luncheon every Sunday.

[18 : 04] When I first came to that church, I felt there was too little fellowship among the members. So everyone, you know, typically would come for Sunday worship. We'd meet together for a couple of hours.

And of course, by that time, it's lunchtime, so everyone's scattered. We go our separate ways. And there didn't seem to be a lot of communication or fellowship in between. So I suggested we stay together for lunch every Sunday.

And once we did that, it was great. But then I noticed another problem. You would have thought we had designated assigned seating at the lunch tables. And you know what I'm talking about.

The same people sat with the same people every week. Why? Why? Well, no one was trying to show favoritism. No one was trying to discriminate against anyone. But naturally, cliques formed.

And people had their favorite lunch partners. And that's with whom they sat with week after week. Even in the early church, favoritism reared its ugly head.

[19 : 05] Not only regarding the rich and the poor, by the way. Read Ephesians. Read Galatians. In fact, the Apostle Paul, he once had to confront Peter to his face because he was showing favoritism.

In fact, listen to this account from Galatians 2. When Cephas, or Peter, came to Antioch, Paul says, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned.

For he regularly ate with the Gentiles before certain men came from James. However, when they came, he withdrew and separated himself because he feared those from the circumcision party.

Then the rest of the Jews joined his hypocrisy so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were deviating, listen to this part, deviating from the truth of the gospel.

Not in doctrine, but in their practice here. I told Cephas in front of everyone, if you who are a Jew live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel Gentiles to live like Jews?

[20 : 13] Even the Apostle Peter wasn't immune. Now, he knew better in his head than to show partiality toward the Jewish Christians over the Gentile Christians. But you see, in our fallen nature, we don't always love people the way we should and we don't always judge people the way we should.

Of course, we can hardly be surprised that Peter was drawn to the Jews. They were, after all, his people. I mean, he grew up as one of them. And I think we're all naturally drawn to people who are like us, right?

People who look like us, people who talk like us, think like us, like the same things, have the same background. But this is not how God loves.

This is not how we are commanded to love. Look back at James 1. I read it. Pure and undefiled religion before God, the Father, is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Again, this comes immediately before chapter 2. So what do you think is happening here? Well, it would seem that at least some of these early Christians were not looking after orphans and widows in their distress.

[21 : 31] And I don't think that's an exhaustive list, by the way. But instead, they are showing favoritism toward the wealthy. They are essentially ignoring the people who actually needed them the most to give their time and their attention to people who, I don't know, seem the most glorious.

Maybe this is a matter of self-interest. You know, what can the poor do for me? Probably not much. But the rich? Well, I might benefit from befriending the rich.

Whatever the reason. As James says, first of all, this is not pleasing to God. This is not pure and undefiled religion before God the Father.

This is a sick and twisted perversion of religion that does not honor God. And second, favoritism and faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ do not mix.

Don't ever attempt to combine them, Philip says. That would be utterly double-minded. That's attempting to walk in opposite directions at the same time.

[22 : 44] There's nothing of Christ in that. James says, this is verse 5, Listen, my dear brothers, didn't God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that He has promised to those who love Him?

Yet you have dishonored the poor. Now James is doing two things here. First, he's reminding us how God Himself loves.

And second, he's setting up this very stark contrast between how God sees glory in people and how we typically see glory.

So first, notice how God loves. Thankfully, he doesn't reserve his love for those who are worthy of it.

Otherwise, who would he love? Remember that James draws very heavily upon the Lord's Sermon on the Mount.

[23 : 47] And according to Jesus in Matthew 5, God chooses the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are humble, those who are merciful, those who are the peacemakers.

Then at the end of Matthew 5, Jesus says, You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

For he causes his Son to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have?

Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what are you doing out of the ordinary? Don't even the Gentiles do the same?

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. God loves even his enemies. Paul writes, While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son.

[25 : 03] That's a far cry from our natural tendency, isn't it? While these early Christians are showing partiality among fellow believers in the church, the Lord says we should love even our enemies.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your heavenly Father. And even more to the point of this study, Jesus said, Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Follow his example. Be like him. You may remember that James uses the same word in his epistle, perfect. It's a word that refers to completeness. It refers to health, wholeness, right?

So, as James addresses our double-mindedness, and he's guiding us slowly but surely toward wholeness, he teaches that love, or at least how we love, is an important part of that.

Now, second, you'll also notice the contrast James makes here. He gives us insight into how God perceives people.

[26 : 12] While these early Christians are evidently drawn to the glory of people who are materially, externally wealthy, James points to the poor in this world.

The poor. And he says, God chose them to be what? Rich in faith. And heirs of the kingdom. In other words, those who are truly rich, those who truly have any glory worth getting excited about, are those whom God has chosen to be rich in faith.

As we all know, appearances can be very deceiving. You likely remember what the Lord told Samuel in 1 Samuel 16. He said, the Lord sees not as man sees.

Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. And this is something we see throughout Jesus' ministry. In John 4, for example, the disciples couldn't believe Jesus was having an intimate conversation with a Samaritan woman.

What's he doing talking to this woman? Many times, the Jewish leaders, they couldn't believe Jesus was having fellowship with sinners and prostitutes and tax collectors.

[27 : 35] You know, that's unbecoming of any self-respecting Jew, but the supposed Messiah? Really? This is the crowd he hangs out with? Well, impartiality was the Lord's reputation, wasn't it?

Do you remember when the Jewish leaders went to Jesus to question him about paying taxes? They approached him and said, Teacher, we know that you speak and teach correctly and you do not show partiality.

Now, there's probably a large part of that. They're just trying to flatter him, but I think they're also appealing to his reputation. This is how the general public knew him.

Everyone knew he was a man of integrity. He didn't show favoritism. Well, James encourages us to look beyond appearances.

We might call this a heavenly perspective. We need a heavenly perspective on people. You know, people like Michael Jackson or any celebrity, they radiate a kind of glory and it's easy to be mesmerized by it.

[28 : 41] You know, Jackson was larger than life. He performed before thousands upon thousands of people. He was incredibly wealthy and influential. His photos were everywhere, everywhere, but read his biography.

He was a broken, tortured, often miserable man and now he's gone. What kind of glory is that?

Now, go and read the Gospels. What did Isaiah say about Jesus? He didn't have an impressive form or any majesty that we would look upon him, no appearance that we should desire him.

This was true throughout his life, but this was especially true when he hung on the cross. And yet, he was God in the flesh. As John said, the world was created through him.

And when he hung on the cross, he accomplished the single most important thing that has ever taken place in the history of the world. But he had no appearance that we should desire him. He had no superficial glory.

[29 : 52] Oh, he had infinitely more glory than any man could ever have, but it wasn't the kind of glory that was in your face obvious, you know, on that surface level.

James says, look again. These brothers and sisters in the church whom you are keeping at arm's length, who do you think they are? They are children of your heavenly Father, the same as you, presumably.

Do you know how much these people are worth to our God? Look at the cross. There's your answer. These people are rich in faith, in heirs of the kingdom.

Do you want to know what kind of glory they have? Well, they share in the glory of the glorious Lord Jesus Christ. Can the rich in this world compete with that?

No. But James continues. In verse 6, he asks, don't the rich oppress you and drag you into court? Don't they blaspheme the good name that was invoked over you?

[31 : 04] Now, he's probably referring to wealthy Jews outside of the church who were using the civic courts to essentially harass and persecute Christians. You know, if they couldn't lock them up in prison, if they couldn't stop the movement, well, at least they could take them to court for one thing or another.

And just like in our day, rich people tend to have an advantage over poor people in these cases. So James is essentially asking, why in the world would you favor the rich?

Think about his arguments so far. First of all, he says, God has special concern for the poor, for those who can't help themselves. And we're called to do the same, which James describes as pure and undefiled religion before God the Father.

And then he says, second, favoritism and faith in Christ, they don't mix. If we're seeking any glory, particularly in people, other than the glory of Christ himself, something is terribly wrong.

We are not loving as we should and our judgment is compromised. Third, God loves the poor in this world. He has chosen them to be rich in faith.

[32 : 18] Now, this doesn't mean every poor person is chosen and it doesn't mean that the rich can't be saved. I think James is speaking in general terms here. And he wants the church to see one another as God sees them, not as the world sees them.

Forget about the worldview out there. And lastly, James reminds these brethren that most, if not all, of the persecution and the trouble they faced has come from wealthy people, which begs the question, what do you find so appealing about material wealth and those who possess it?

You know, we could ask ourselves the same question. Our circumstances may be considerably different than they were in James' day, but aren't we still frequently finding ourselves attracted to the wrong kind of glory in people?

Well, James continues, verse 8. Indeed, if you fulfill the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well.

If, however, you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the entire law and yet stumbles at one point is guilty of breaking it all.

[33 : 50] For he who said, do not commit adultery also said, do not murder. So if you do not commit adultery but you murder, you are a lawbreaker. So in case we think showing partiality is, you know, just a minor offense, probably not even worth mentioning, James says, think again, it is a violation of God's law.

It is sin. Now, anyone with a good Jewish upbringing might ask, what are you talking about, James? Just because I prefer one type of person over another doesn't mean I violated the law.

I honor my parents. I haven't committed murder or adultery. I haven't stolen from anyone. I haven't bore false witness against anyone. What do you mean I violated the law?

Well, James says, that's not really how the law works. While we tend to think of our sins as, you know, having varying degrees of severity, the truth is one violation of the law is a complete violation.

For example, you can't tell a lie and then excuse yourself by saying, well, at least I didn't kill someone. One violation is enough to condemn.

[35 : 20] Furthermore, there's also the matter of interpreting the law. Jesus dealt with this in the Sermon on the Mount. In one place, just to give you one example, he said, you have heard that it was said to our ancestors, do not murder, and whoever murders will be subject to judgment.

But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Whoever insults his brother will be subject to the court.

Whoever says, you fool, will be subject to hellfire. You see, there's the letter of the law and then there's the spirit of the law. And many of the Jews were guilty of intentionally ignoring the spirit of the law for the purpose of, I guess, self-righteousness.

You know, they could boast, look how righteous I am. I've never killed anyone. Maybe not, Jesus says. But you wanted to. You've been angry with people.

You've insulted people. You've essentially committed murder in your heart. That's specifically what he says about adultery. No, you've never committed adultery, but you've committed it in your heart.

[36 : 33] You're still guilty. And let's not forget what the law explicitly states in Leviticus 19.

Love your neighbor as yourself. James calls this the royal law. Jesus said, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets depend on these two commands.

In short, we can't skirt around our obligation to God's law. We can't get ourselves off on a technicality, if you know what I mean. We can't claim to fulfill God's law by claiming our violations of it are really lesser sins.

In fact, this issue of favoritism in the church is actually quite serious. I mean, I read from Galatians 2. It's an issue of the gospel.

[37 : 45] When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he essentially describes it as a gospel issue. Now, their situation in Ephesus was a little different. It was a potential divide between Jews and Gentiles rather than the rich and the poor, but I think the principle is fundamentally the same.

Paul said, Christ is our peace who has made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility, which is to say we don't dare build it again.

He goes on to write, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, that is, with one another in the church. But fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

You see, favoritism is not a so-called lesser sin. It's serious. Furthermore, it's evidence of a divided heart, which is a violation of what Jesus called the greatest and most important command.

the divided heart says, I love God, but I don't love His law. It says, I am loved by God, but, you know, I don't want to love like God.

[39 : 15] It says, I believe God is our judge, but I'd rather judge people myself. But do you know what every last one of us stands in need of?

It isn't judgment. It's mercy. Verse 12, speak and act as those who are to be judged by the law of freedom, for judgment is without mercy to the one who has not shown mercy.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. So, as we interact with one another, James offers us two guiding principles.

Love in mercy. We can't go wrong if we love as God loves and show mercy as He shows mercy.

Let's pray together. Dear Lord of glory, we thank you for this precious time spent together studying your word.

[40 : 32] Help us to see beyond outward appearances. Help us to love without showing favoritism. Help us to reflect always on the love of Christ in all that we do.

Grant us the grace to not only be hearers of this word but doers of it. Let us show mercy as you have shown mercy to us and may our lives always be marked by humility and compassion.

Lord, strengthen us to walk in your ways, honoring you in every aspect of our lives. May we be wholehearted, singularly devoted to you. May our faith be genuine and our love for one another sincere.

And we pray all of this in the precious name of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.