

## **Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment**

James 2:1-13

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The introduction will be a little longer than I like, so bear with me because we need to do some extra work to set up James 2:1-13. I want to make sure you understand how Jewish wisdom literature works.

Have you ever been around someone who repeats themselves all the time, even when it seems unnecessary? Sometimes people do it because they are nervous. I remember when I first started preaching, I would repeat myself too much because I was nervous. I'm not a naturally gifted public speaker. Preaching is something the Lord had to call me to, and then I had to grind the gears until I eventually got the hang of it. Repeating myself was a way to fill space, and because I feared silence. Some people repeat themselves for other reasons.

I have a friend in Texas who is incredibly repetitive. When I talk to him on the phone or in person, he tells the same story maybe three or four times, and he doesn't realize he is doing it. It's funny, and I just laugh to myself, but I have to prepare myself because the phone call or a visit isn't going to be a short one.

However, there is a pattern of repetitiveness that is intentional and used in teaching. This kind of repetitiveness is what we find in James' letter to the churches. The letter of James is typical Jewish wisdom literature, using the literary device of *amplification* to teach. So, as Pastor Dean said, chapter 1 is the foundation of the letter; after that, James begins to unpack his main points and application in greater detail throughout the remainder of the letter.

Think about James writing style this way: Take your service guide, and draw a dot and spiral that dot out. This is how James writes. He makes his point in chapter 1 and then spirals out, repeating, unpacking, and applying his main points on wisdom. As we begin chapter 2, that spiral is growing outward.

The text we will cover this morning finds its beginning in James 1:9-11. I want you to hear these verses before we get into James 2:1-13. This will allow us to get the feel of the effect of amplification.

*Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation,<sup>10</sup> and the rich in his humiliation,  
because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.<sup>11</sup> For the sun rises with its  
scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So  
also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.*

In this text, James signals what he will unpack in greater detail as he pours out the wisdom of God from His pen. Now that he has put James 1:9-11 in the center dot, in chapter 2, vv. 1-13, he begins to amplify by making very specific applications.

So, as he begins, everything in vv. 1-13 flow out of v. 1. Verse 1 is the main point of this passage, and in a way, v. 13 is a bookend of this passage, for it essentially is another way of saying and applying v. 1. Look at the last phrase of v. 13,

*Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

That is only true as you hold to your faith in *our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory*. So, right out of the gate, we learn that verses 1-13 are grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

With that being said, I need to show you one more unique characteristic of the Letter of James. James doesn't write like the Apostle Paul. Paul was much more explicit in his explanation of the gospel. Paul would write half a letter just explaining the gospel and then say, "*In light of the gospel, the person and work of Jesus, live like this.*" Then he would give us gospel applications of his doctrines.

James, on the other hand, gives us the tip of the gospel-iceberg and expects us to understand that he is telling us to live this way in light of the gospel. You must be a careful reader and put on your gospel glasses in order to see the gospel in James' letter. For example, listen to v. 1 again:

*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Lord of glory.*

This is the tip of the gospel-iceberg kind of verse. You have to understand that James intends for you to look deeper into a phrase like, "*as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*" He wants your mind to travel back to the cross and what Jesus did for sinners.

Bottom line: We can't have genuine faith in Jesus without knowing who Jesus truly is and that He came and died on the cross to pay for our sins by being crucified. There, the wrath of God was poured on Him for our sins until it killed Him. Then He was buried, and three days later He rose from the dead being victorious over death.

Are you tracking with me? Good. Now, let's dig into this morning's text and see what James wants us to learn and apply. James 2:1-13 is going to answer the question: *Do we truly see people through the eyes of the person and work of Jesus?* In other words: *Does the gospel truly transform how we see and treat all people?*

A few years ago, the late Jerry Bridges wrote a book titled: *Respectable Sins*. In it, he cataloged and addressed sins that the current Christian church simply overlooked or just tolerated as okay to commit. He didn't specifically address favoritism, but he addressed its cousins: judgmentalism and pride, which are at the heart of favoritism.

The bottom line is that there are sins the church easily condemns. We preach against adultery, drunkenness, greed, and blasphemy. But other sins quietly sit in pews every Sunday wearing respectable clothes. One of those sins is *partiality or favoritism*.

Favoritism is the subtle temptation to value people according to external standards rather than according to the grace of God. It's the tendency to honor the wealthy, admire the powerful, value the attractive, and overlook those who are weak and unappealing. It is the sin of treating one person as more worthy of dignity, love, or attention than another because of their appearance, status, race, education, influence, or economic position.

Listen to me, because you need to get this point: James does not treat favoritism as a minor social flaw. *He treats it as a contradiction of the gospel itself.* So, this passage is not merely about being polite. It's not about breaking the law of favoritism. It is about whether the church truly understands the person and work of Jesus Christ on the cross, His resurrection from the dead, and all that it accomplished to transform sinners into saints.

Friends, the gospel announces that spiritually bankrupt sinners are welcomed by sheer mercy through faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, when Christians practice favoritism, we deny the very grace we proclaim with our lips. We minimize Christ's sacrifice on the cross for all people.

So, James confronts the church with a piercing question: *How can people who were saved solely by mercy refuse to show mercy to others?*

So, let's get to work on James 2:1-13 and answer our questions: *Do we truly see people through the eyes of the person and work of Jesus? Does the gospel truly transform how we see and treat all people?* In this passage, we will see how the gospel kills the sin of favoritism. I have four points to help us walk through these verses.

### **I. The gospel makes no distinction between people (vv. 1-4)**

First, look at v. 1:

*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Lord of glory.*

James begins to unpack this section of his letter by amplifying chapter 1, vv. 9-11<sup>1</sup>. He shows both tenderness toward his brothers and sisters in Christ, and he exercises his authority as an Apostle by giving a command. He calls them “*my brothers.*” This is pastoral correction, not cold condemnation. Yet his command is absolute: “*show no partiality.*”

The phrase “*show no partiality*” literally means “*do not receive someone according to their face.*” The picture back in those days is much like it is today. When someone walks into a room, you want to greet them with your face raised and smiling. On the other hand, if you see someone you don’t highly regard, you drop your face to the ground and try to avoid them.

What James calls us to do is not to judge a person’s outward appearance. He doesn’t want us to assign a person’s value based on external factors. The problem is *not* noticing differences among people. Scripture never commands us to be blind to reality. The problem is assigning worth, dignity, or honor based on worldly standards.

But you need to pay close attention to what James says next. This is so important because if you miss it, you will practice living by the law and not living in light of the gospel. Remember what he said:

*As you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*

James not only grounds his command in Christology but specifically in the atoning work of Jesus on the cross. He is saying you can’t live out this commandment unless you have faith in Jesus and are resting in the completed work of Jesus on your behalf. Listen, we do not have some vague kind of faith in Jesus. We have a very specific faith in what Jesus has done for us on the cross and by His resurrection from the dead.

You can say, “*I have faith in Jesus.*” That’s good, but you’d better understand specifically who Jesus is and what Jesus did for sinners. Then, you had better repent of your sins and place your faith in Him because of the work He did for you. Our faith is not vague, and James expects us to see through his command to Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead.

Now, listen to me, as we work through this text, we will see how the person of Christ and His work on the cross is the key to destroying favoritism in your heart.

Look at the title James gives Jesus, “*The Lord of glory.*” As we work through these verses, we will see and even feel the contrast of what it means to be in love with the Lord of Glory or to be in love with earthly glory like the rich man in the passage who shines with visible splendor with his gold rings, fine clothing, and public prestige. We need to ask ourselves if we value and are in love with “*counterfeit glory*” or with the “*King of Glory?*” Because here’s the deal: *Worldly favoritism reveals a heart that is still captivated by worldly splendor and not the Lord of glory.*

Next, after James makes his thesis statement in v. 1, he begins to illustrate and apply it to the church. Look at what he says in vv. 2-4:

*For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in,<sup>3</sup> and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,”<sup>4</sup> have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

Wow! James calls them on the carpet as he seemingly paints this very specific scene. The church immediately reveals its values because the rich man gets the good seat in church, but the poor man is told,

*“Hey, listen, you need to stand at the back of the congregation, or you can sit beneath me.”*

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<sup>1</sup> We must remember this is was originally a letter and there were no chapters and verses. James simply begins to apply traditional Jewish wisdom writing by amplifying something he said earlier. Thus the letter begins to spiral out in amplification and application of God wisdom for living a life that is pleasing to God.

This is not merely bad hospitality, as the person is being told to stand farthest away or to sit beneath someone. This is a strategy for where you put *the least important people*. James tells them in v. 4 that they have “*made distinctions among*” themselves and become judges with evil thoughts.

Listen to me: James is severe with the church. Why? Because favoritism transforms Christians into “*judges with evil thoughts.*” Showing favoritism usurps God’s authority. Only God has the authority to make distinctions between people because only God sees the heart. When we evaluate people based on appearance, status, wealth, race, education, or usefulness, we put ourselves in the place of God. Only God is able to make just judgments according to people’s hearts.

Think about Jesus’ ministry when He was on earth. Jesus moved toward the *least of these* and the *unwanted*. He moved toward *women who were marginalized, tax collectors who were ostracized, lepers who were considered cursed, and children who were overlooked.*

In Mark 1, a leper approached Jesus, saying, “*If you will, you can make me clean.*” Everyone else recoiled from the leper, but Jesus touched him. This is not just a big deal; it is massive because to touch someone unclean meant you would become unclean. The touch mattered almost as much as the healing. So, instead of healing this man simply with a word, Jesus placed his holy hands upon the diseased skin. The Son of God touched the untouchable, and instead of Jesus becoming unclean, the man was healed by Jesus’ holiness.

Friends, that is a picture of the power of the gospel. Jesus does not merely tolerate sinners from a distance. He draws near to the spiritually filthy and makes them clean. Just like he drew near to your filthy, sin-sick heart, and touched it by His Spirit and healed it, and made you whole.

Listen to me, don’t miss this: Your healing came at a cost. Jesus shed His blood in order to bring you to Himself. The invitation Jesus gives to you is written in His blood, and it is His blood that brought you near to God, not your spiritual intuition, education, appearance, wealth, status, or family background.

So, here’s the deal: You and I have no right to show favoritism because we have all been the least of these, no matter who you are. The church cannot claim allegiance to Christ while despising and rejecting those whom Christ welcomes by His blood. You are bought with a price.

Next, notice what James does. He moves from this illustration/application and flips it around to help us see the other side of the coin of the gospel’s work in our lives.

## **II. Favoritism is contrary to the gospel of the Kingdom of God (vv. 5-7)**

Let’s begin by looking at v. 5. He is about to say more hard things to them, but I want you to notice his pastoral tenderness as he begins his exhortation:

*Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?*

Here’s what you need to know: James is not teaching that poverty automatically saves someone or that the wealthy are automatically condemned. Just study the Bible, and you will find people who love God who were wealthy. Abraham was wealthy. Job was wealthy. King David was wealthy. Joseph of Arimathea was wealthy. So, here’s the issue: It is the spiritual condition of your heart.

In general, the poor often recognize their need more readily than the rich. Material weakness and poverty frequently lead people to the end of themselves so that they cry out to God for help. They find Jesus and then depend upon Him.

Now, what I am saying is that this is generally true. The fact is, spiritual pride can exist in those who live in poverty, too. They don’t want to depend on God; instead, they want to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. However, generally, those who are poor recognize their need for God and cry out to Him for salvation.

On the other hand, wealth can, in general, create the delusions of self-sufficiency. Whereby, people don’t believe they need Jesus. They can make it on their own. Wealthy people believe they don’t need to be saved or need God or depend on anyone because their bank account is full.

So, what James does is point to God's pattern throughout Scripture. God *delights* to save the weak, the overlooked, the unimpressive, the helpless, the marginalized, and the least of these so that His grace is magnified and His glory is on display for all to see.

The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1 that God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. Why? So no human being might boast before Him. *What this means is that favoritism is fundamentally anti-gospel because it rebuilds the hierarchy Christ died to demolish.*

Let me show you what I mean. The Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:13-16,

*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup> by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.*

Let's not rebuild what Jesus died to destroy. Think about what we see in the upside-down Kingdom of God. God chose: shepherds instead of kings, fishermen instead of philosophers, David instead of his older brothers, Bethlehem instead of Jerusalem, a manger instead of a palace, and a cross instead of a throne. Friends, the gospel humiliates human pride and favoritism. *Again, favoritism is fundamentally anti-gospel.*

We've got to keep going. Look in vv. 6-7. James is about to drop the hammer on them:

*But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? <sup>7</sup> Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?*

Listen, James exposes the absurdity of their behavior. Do you realize what was happening? The poor in the church were honoring the very rich. It is as if he is shocked, because they honored the very ones who were oppressing them (the poor) by dragging them into court and suing them for more money. They were valuing and honoring the very ones who were blaspheming Christ by not living in line with the gospel.

The church was courting the world's approval at the expense of obedience to God. Hey, listen, we need to be very careful here when we look at the churches James was writing to. We can point our fingers at them and forget we have three fingers pointing back at us.

Friends, churches still do this today. If we are not careful, we will subtly prioritize: Big givers over servants, charisma over holiness, influence over humility, and celebrity over faithfulness. We need to remember that God's Kingdom has a radically different value system than the world's.

These churches he was writing to had absorbed worldly assumptions: *"If someone is important in society, they must deserve special honor in the church."* James says that mentality belongs to the world, not the kingdom of God.

So, what are we to do when we are tempted to practice favoritism in the church? When tempted, we need to remember what the Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 8:9,

*Though he [Jesus] was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.*

Friends, the incarnation of Jesus into human flesh is the ultimate rejection of favoritism and pride. Think about it: The eternal Son possessed infinite glory, infinite majesty, and infinite wealth beyond comprehension. Yet He entered human poverty. He was born to ordinary parents, raised in obscurity, rejected by leaders, mocked by soldiers, and executed among criminals.

Bottom line: When we are tempted to practice favoritism, we must preach the gospel to ourselves. When we are tempted to play favorites, we need to remember that hidden beneath the carpenter's clothes was the majesty and glory of God. Isaiah tells us:

*He had no form or majesty that we should look at him.*

Friends, showing favoritism is not living in line with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Why do I say it this way? Why don't I just say, "You've broken the law of favoritism?" For this reason, don't miss this. Do you remember in Galatians 2 when Peter and Barnabas separated themselves from the Gentiles and only began to eat with the Jews because certain influential Jewish people of the circumcision party showed up in that church? The Apostle Paul called them out, but he didn't tell him he was breaking the law of racism. No! He told him he was not living in line with the gospel. Listen to what he said in Galatians 2:14,

*But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel.*

In other words, Jesus didn't live a perfect life, die on the cross, and rise from the dead to set you free so you can return to the slavery of the sin, racism, and favoritism. He didn't die on the cross and rise from the dead so you can rebuild the dividing wall of hostility through your favoritism.

James could have stopped here and been just fine, but he didn't. He continued to drive the arrow of the gospel deeper into their spiritual hearts.

### **III. The gospel is the royal law of love fulfilled by Jesus (vv. 8-11)**

Before we read vv. 8-9, I want to clue you in on how James begins this argument. He says, "If you really fulfill the royal law . . ." James is assuming that you and I are tracking with him and understand that all that he has been talking about keeping the two greatest commandments, which Jesus gave in Matthew 22:37-40,

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.<sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment.<sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.<sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.*

So, James is assuming you and I understand that vv. 1-7 have been about living by and applying these two great commandments in Scripture.

So, now in vv. 8-9, he goes for the heart. Look at what he says,

*If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well.<sup>9</sup> But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.*

Why does James call the two greatest commandments the *royal law*? This is the only place in Scripture where it is called that. He calls it that because it comes from King Jesus, it governs the Kingdom of God, it was how the King lived His life on earth, and therefore, it was fulfilled by the King for us. This law is the standard by which we will all be judged, and you and I are unable to fulfill this law because we are sinners, but there is One who fulfilled it for us.

When King Jesus came to earth, He came to fulfill this law on behalf of His people who wouldn't and couldn't. Then He died in our place and for our sins on the cross of breaking this law. His fulfillment of the *royal law* is where He purchased our ability to desire to keep this law and to repent when we transgress it and fail to hold fast to our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. This is why it is called the royal law.

Finally, in vv. 10-11, James delivers a devastating theological point. Look at what he says,

*For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.<sup>11</sup> For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.*

What does he mean by, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it," and why would he say this? He is making sure that you and I understand that you just don't pick and choose which laws you will keep and which ones you find inconvenient or not worth keeping.

The royal law reflects the nature and character of the Lawgiver. So, to break one commandment is, in essence, to break all of the laws. Breaking the law of God, even one law, is rebellion against the Lawgiver.

In v. 11, James uses adultery and murder as examples. Someone may avoid one sin while committing another, yet still stand guilty before God. His goal by using this as an illustration is to destroy self-righteousness. So, someone who avoids the so-called “*big sins*” like murder and adultery and yet holds to “*respectable sins*” like favoritism is just as guilty as the one who commits the big sins. Sin is sin, and our sin is against the Holy Lawgiver. So, when we sin, we are called to repent of all sin, not just the big ones, and live with the one we deem *respectable*.

Listen, the heart of the issue is the issue of the heart, and pride is at the heart of the sin of favoritism. The fact is, we tend to favor people who make us feel important. We tend to gravitate toward people who increase our social cred. The opposite is also true, for we tend to ignore people who seem inconvenient and don’t advance our social status. *At its core, favoritism is self-love and self-righteousness masquerading as godly wisdom.*<sup>2</sup>

However, the gospel rips the mask off of our fake wisdom, self-righteousness, and self-love. The gospel exposes us all as spiritual beggars and spiritual adulterers.

Listen, when you come to Jesus, and you stand at the foot of His cross, the wealthy will stand beside the poor. The educated will stand beside the uneducated. The respected will stand beside the disgraced. We all come the same way – by the mercy of Jesus Christ, purchased on the cross.

On the cross, the wisdom of God was crucified for our sin in order to purchase the mercy we need to come before the throne of the King and be counted as righteous. He purchased the mercy we need to enable us to repent of the sin of favoritism and not simply live with it. This leads us to our last point.

#### **IV. By the gospel, mercy triumphs over judgment (vv. 12-13)**

*So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.*

In v. 12, James closes with urgency. He wants us to understand that our faith in Christ is not theoretical or merely academic. True faith in Christ changes us from the inside out so that it changes how we speak and act. This change occurs because we have been born again. Our dead hearts have been raised to life by the Spirit of Jesus.

When James talks about the “*law of liberty*,” he’s not saying we are free from obedience. On the contrary, he means we have freedom through grace and by a grace-driven effort to live in joyful obedience to Christ. Specifically, he says that those who have been saved by the mercy of Christ become merciful people and therefore live to kill the sin of favoritism, because favoritism is contrary to the mercy of Jesus.

Finally, and one more time, in v. 13, James doesn’t mince words and leaves us with another sobering statement.

*For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy.*

Listen, James is not teaching salvation by works. Scripture is clear that salvation comes by grace through faith. He is saying that genuine faith reveals a transformed heart that is merciful. We learn this from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

On the other hand, mercilessness reveals an unchanged heart. Hearing that your heart may not be changed, or in other words, that you may not be born again, can be devastating. This means you’re living in rebellion against Jesus.

But here’s the good news. James doesn’t leave us in a pit of hopelessness and despair. Look at the last sentence in our text because it gives us hope and calls us to turn to the One who shows us mercy and will forgive our sin if we will but repent:

*Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

Listen, this is not just a platitude or a slogan to put on your coffee cup or a T-shirt. This is a blood-bought truth.

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<sup>2</sup> I adapted this aphorism by Mason Cooley and gave it its true application from a biblical perspective. (Mason Cooley, *City Aphorisms*, 1987).

Where does mercy triumph over judgment? Friends, the cross is where judgment and mercy meet. At the cross, justice was satisfied when the wrath of God was poured out on the Son of God for our sin. He was condemned so that we may be declared righteous, and with that declaration, the mercy of God was unleashed and poured out on us, for God didn't ignore our sin. He judged it fully and completely by punishing Jesus for our sins so that sinners can receive His mercy. This is how mercy triumphs over judgment.

Let me wrap up the message by returning to our original question: *Do we truly see people through the eyes of the gospel?* Friends, favoritism reveals a heart still enchanted by worldly glory. So, ask yourself: Whom do I naturally avoid? Whom do I instinctively admire? Who makes me uncomfortable? Whose approval do I crave? Whom do I overlook? Perhaps these questions will help you do a checkup on your spiritual heart.

If you see things in your life that concern you or realize you've stumbled into the sin of favoritism, remember that mercy reveals a heart transformed by the person and work of Christ on the cross. So, the solution is not *"do more, try harder."* It's not behavior modification or counseling. It's not working on a moral improvement program. It's not law keeping. It's not getting a new set of ethical standards. The solution is to behold Jesus in the gospels.

Friends, when we are struggling and being tempted to commit the sin of favoritism, we fight this sin by beholding the Lord of Glory, our Savior who touched lepers, who welcomed children, who ate with sinners, who washed the feet of His foolish disciples, who died for enemies, and who rose again to create one redeemed people is the only solution. When we behold the glory of the Lord of Glory doing these things, what happens is what the Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 3:18,

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

When we repent of our sin of favoritism and behold the glory of Jesus in His word, in worship, in prayer, and among the people of God, supernaturally, by the Holy Spirit, the mercy of Jesus triumphs over judgment, our hearts are transformed, and the sin of favoritism is killed.

I am going to pray, and we will sing *"Just as I Am (I Come Broken)"* on page 12 of the Service Guide. Friends, this is a wonderful hymn that helps us sing of the glory of Christ's sacrificial and substitutionary death for us on the cross, and it also helps us sing of our repentance. So, sing it with all of your heart and mean every word of the song.