

God's Good Gifts: James 1:16-18
Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church
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Last Sunday, as we studied James 1:13-15, we were confronted with the painful truth that we cannot blame anyone for the sinful desires that arise from within our own hearts. It is our sin, and we are the ones to blame. We cannot blame the people around us, and we certainly cannot blame God. For God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one (v. 13). What we're going to see in our passage this morning is the related truth that every good thing is from God. Temptation and sin we cannot attribute to God. Instead, we must see that everything good comes from God. He is not the one who tempts us. He is the One who gives us every good and every perfect gift.

Verse 16 is a transitional verse between verses 13-15 and verses 17-18. Verse 13 tells us what God does NOT do: He cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. Now in verses 17-18 we are told positively what God DOES: He gives good gifts, and particularly He gives us new birth.

In between these two points, James gives this warning: "Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers." And I think this warning relates to what he has just stated in verses 13-15 and also to what he is about to say in verses 17-18.

He's saying, Don't be deceived and think that God is tempting you. Don't try to blame God, or anybody else, for your sin. In doing so, you are being deceived.

Likewise, do not doubt God's goodness. Don't doubt the fact that every good gift and every perfect gift is from Him. We are deceived when we don't give God the credit for the good gifts in our lives.

James is such a good teacher, and he interrupts himself here to get the readers' attention. Don't be deceived! The sin in your heart, as well as the sin and evil around you, will seek to lead you astray. But don't be deceived. Pay attention to this instruction! Listen to the truth, and live according to the truth. James also expresses his deep love for the readers of this letter. "My beloved brothers." This is not the only place where he refers to his readers in this way. The letter is filled with these references to his brothers, or his "beloved brothers." There is a toughness about this letter, but also a tenderness. James speaks the truth *in love*. That's something we should notice in the way James communicates, and it's something we should seek to emulate in our own lives.

There are three points that I would like to make now as we look at verses 17 and 18. Each point is a truth about God, either a statement about who He is or what He does.

I. God is the Giver of All Good Gifts

First of all, we see at the beginning of verse 17 that God is the giver of all good gifts. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights . . .” This is an amazing thing to think about. The verse is emphatic. *Every good gift and every perfect gift.* Everything good in your life is from God. Everything! The physical and material blessings that come to us every day—they are from God. The spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ—it is all a gift from God. Any measure of holiness that is present within us—it is completely a work of God’s grace. Everything good—within us or around us—is a good gift and a perfect gift from God.

These gifts are from above. They come down from the Father of lights. The origin of these gifts is God. No good thing originates within us or in this fallen world. Every good gift is from God.

Here are some applications of this truth.

1) Give God the credit that is due Him.

Everything good is from God, therefore when we recognize good things in us or around us we must give God the credit. Again, this is related to the truth that we studied last week. We have to take the credit for everything evil within us (that’s verses 13-15). We can’t blame God, but have to own up to the fact that we are the guilty ones. We are the only ones to blame for our own sin. That’s one crushing blow to our sensitive egos. And then the second blow comes from this truth, that God is origin of *every* good thing. The bottom line is that we have to accept the blame for everything evil in us, and give God the credit for everything good in us. John Gill said it this way: “This is a settled and certain point, that all the good that is in men, and is done by them, comes from God; and all the evil that is in them, and done by them, is of themselves” (Gill’s Commentary, Vol. 5, 783).

Of course, we would like to reverse this equation. We would rather take credit for the good and blame others for the evil. And this is what we so often try to do. But we are only deceiving ourselves and making the matter worse.

It’s a humbling truth to realize that I, and I alone, am responsible for the sin in my heart, and God alone is responsible for any good that is in my heart. I am the one to blame for all my sin, and God gets the credit for everything good. I get no glory. God gets all the glory. That’s the way it is. On the one hand this is devastating to us, because it explodes the myth of self-righteousness. We want to be *self*-righteous. We want to make ourselves righteous and then take the credit for what we’ve done. That’s nonsense. It’s deception. It’s a mirage. It’s a myth. This truth is devastating to the Pharisee that dwells within each of us.

But on the other hand this is extremely freeing and encouraging and joyous, because it draws our focus away from ourselves and causes us to focus on something so much more glorious. We are rescued from the insanity of self-centeredness and vainglory, and we are given the unspeakable joy of being God-centered and seeking God's glory. Give God the credit that is due Him. Look away from yourself and delight in God's goodness.

2) Fight sin with the knowledge of God's goodness.

Do you remember Satan's opening line in Genesis 3 when he was tempting Eve? He said, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" What was Satan trying to do? He was trying to make Eve doubt the goodness and generosity of God.

We are tempted to disobey God when we doubt His goodness. If your view of God is that He is trying to spoil your fun and rain on your parade, you will have no lasting motivation to obey Him. Because you're doubting His goodness. You're not recognizing that His commands are for your good. His commands are not designed to minimize your joy, but to maximize your joy.

Two examples: Maybe you resent the fact that God calls us to give cheerfully. Maybe that bothers you. Maybe you don't believe that it's more blessed to give than to receive. Maybe you begin to doubt God's goodness, and you think that you would have a lot more fun if you could use all your money for yourself. What will that do to your soul? It will cause you to disobey. It will cause you to sin. And then, of course, with sin comes misery. You will become selfish and greedy and unloving, and your pleasures will be limited to very shallow and private pleasures. We need to fight sin with the knowledge that God is the giver of every good gift and every perfect gift. As James wrote in verse 5, God "gives generously to all without finding fault." God is good, and He gives generously. And His instruction that we should give generously and cheerfully is not an attempt to make our lives miserable. It's just the opposite. It's to save us from being miserable. It's to free us from materialism and selfishness, and to give us the joy of seeing God work through us and through the resources He has given to us. Fight selfishness and greed with the knowledge that God is good, and all of His commands are for our good.

Another example is God's guidelines concerning sexual purity. I especially think of those who are single, who may be tempted to think that sex shouldn't have to be limited to a marriage relationship. You might think, "How could God tell me that I can't have sex? How could He deny me that pleasure?" Please, meditate on this truth that God is good in every way, and everything good comes from Him. All of His commands are good and perfect, and they are for our joy. He's not trying to deny you

pleasure. He wants to spare you from the shame and remorse and emptiness that come from sexual immorality.

3) Cultivate a spirit of thankfulness.

Do you think very often about the undeserved gifts that you have received, and continue to receive, every second of your life? We're not very good at this, are we? We get comfortable with the things we have, we get used to the conveniences of our society, we become accustomed to various things, and then we start to expect those things. We take them for granted. And then instead of being grateful, we become very critical and ornery and not very fun to be around. Because instead of overflowing with thankfulness for the many good gifts that God showers upon us every day, we just focus on the few little things that didn't happen the way we wanted them to.

Last week I was listening to a message by C. J. Mahaney which he preached at the Together for the Gospel conference in Louisville, KY recently. And one of his main points had to do with gratefulness, and the relationship between gratefulness and complaining. He said that if we don't cultivate a spirit of gratefulness in our lives, we will be susceptible to the temptation of complaining. He went on to explain how complaining is an evidence of pride and is a grave offense against God. We must humble ourselves and be grateful to God for all of His good gifts, even the things that may seem like an inconvenience to us at the moment.

Let's open up our eyes and rejoice in the tender mercies of our Lord. They never come to an end. They are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23). Let's taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8). Let's recognize and be thankful for the fact that every good gift and every perfect gift is from God.

II. God is Unchanging

The second thing that we see about God in this passage is that He is unchanging. James refers to God here as the Father of lights, and then describes Him as having no variation or shadow due to change. He's alluding to the heavenly lights, the lights we see in the sky—the sun, the moon, the stars. These are lights which our Father created. He is the Father of lights. He is the One who said, "Let there be light," and there was light (Genesis 1:3). Not only is God the creator of all light, light is also an appropriate way of describing His nature. The Apostle John writes that "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). James has just told us that "God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one" (v. 13), and now he refers to God as the Father of lights. James is teaching us about the character of God. There is no evil in God. There is no darkness. He is the Father of lights. He *is* light, and He creates all light.

And then James draws a contrast here between the heavenly lights which God created, and God Himself. The sun, moon, and stars are constantly changing and moving. They are characterized by variation and changing shadows. But God never changes. There is no variation in God. He is not fickle, like we are. He never goes back on His Word. He is a solid rock. He is trustworthy. He will always be there—immovable, unshakable, faithful to His promises.

The simple application from this point is that we ought to trust Him. He is the only One in the universe who is completely reliable and trustworthy. He will not change His plans. He will not fail us. He is steadfast and unwavering. He is the giver of all good gifts, and that will never change. So when everything in your life seems like it is changing and shaking and crumbling, look to the One who never changes.

III. God Causes Us to be Born Again

This brings us to verse 18, and to the glorious truth of regeneration. This is one of the good and perfect gifts that come down from the Father of lights. This is also the solution to our sad predicament which was so vividly described in verses 14-15. We are filled with sinful desires, and that sin will conceive and grow within us and bring forth death. And regeneration is the only solution to this problem. The solution is not in us. But the solution is in God, who is the giver of all good gifts, and who is unchanging. And now in verse 18 we learn this also about God, that God causes us to be born again. He is the One who “brought us forth,” which is the main statement of verse 18. The same verb was used in verse 15 to describe desire *giving birth* to sin. In verse 18 it’s the Father who gave birth to us. He brought us forth. He caused us to be born again. This is what we call regeneration.

There are three things that this verse reveals to us about regeneration. We’re told the origin of regeneration, the means of regeneration, and the purpose of regeneration.

1) The Origin of Regeneration

Do you see what this verse very clearly says about the origin of regeneration? Where does this miraculous work originate? It originates in the will of God. The verse begins—“Of his own will he brought us forth . . .” It was not an act of our will that brought about regeneration. It was God’s sovereign will—His sovereign choice—that brought us forth. This reminds us of John 1:12-13, which says, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” When we look at our lives, and understand that we were once dead in our trespasses and sins and we are now alive in Christ—when we see that radical change that occurred in

our hearts, we must attribute it wholly to God. It was not our doing. It did not originate in our will, but in God's.

It is certainly true that the human will is active in conversion, but regeneration precedes conversion. Regeneration comes before conversion. God has to change our hearts before we will repent of our sin and trust in Jesus Christ. When we were dead in our sin, we were prisoners to our sinful desires. We would have never chosen to leave our sin and embrace Christ. That is how debilitating sin is. It keeps us from making any move toward God. But when God, of His own will, chooses to regenerate our hearts, we then irresistibly choose to repent of our sin and put our faith in Jesus. God chooses us first, and changes our hearts and desires, and only then do we choose Him.

This means that God gets all the glory in our salvation. God did this sovereign work to break through our hard hearts and replace the heart of stone with a heart of flesh. And therefore we must not try to take any of the glory for ourselves. We must recognize God's sovereign grace in causing us to be born again, and we must give Him all the credit.

2) The Means of Regeneration.

We also see in this verse the means of regeneration. "Of his own will he brought us forth *by the word of truth* . . ." The word of truth is the means by which God causes us to be born again. The word of truth is the Gospel message.

Paul uses this phrase in Ephesians 1:13, "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit." Also in Colossians 1:5, "Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you . . ." The word of truth is the Gospel message, and it is by this word of truth that God changes hearts. Listen to how Peter makes the same connection between regeneration and the word. 1 Peter 1:23 says, "since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God." Two verses later he writes, "And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (v. 25). Peter is saying the same thing that James is saying. We have been born again, and the means by which we were born again is the word of God—the Gospel.

God has done something spectacular for the glory of His Name and for the salvation of His people. He sent His one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to live a perfect life on this earth and then to die on a cross as the substitute for sinners. On the cross Jesus "was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed" as it says in Isaiah 53. Jesus died for sinners, and the Gospel message is a call for sinners to

repent of their sin and put their faith in Jesus Christ—to love this news and delight in this news that Christ took our punishment so that we can be forgiven. This is the glorious Gospel, and it is God’s plan and purpose to cause new birth *through* this message.

God chooses to glorify Himself and glorify His Son by regenerating hearts *through* the proclamation of this Gospel message. It may happen as a person sits alone reading the Bible. It may happen as a person listens to a Christian friend share their testimony. It could happen in the midst of a small group discussion, or a Sunday School lesson, or a sermon. It could be that a person randomly stumbles across a Gospel tract or some Gospel literature of some kind, or happens upon a church website. We don’t know how or when God will choose to use these various methods of communicating the Good News, but what we know for sure is that regeneration will always be connected somehow to the proclamation of this message.

This is such a powerful motivation for us to evangelize, to be tireless in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. Pray for your unbelieving family members and neighbors and co-workers, and look for opportunities to talk with them about the Gospel. Encourage people to read the Bible. Give them Christian books, or Gospel tracts. Invite people to your small groups, bring people to Sunday School and our worship services, send friends links to sermons they can listen to or online Gospel presentations. Be creative. Be bold. Be diligent in prayer. And as we exalt Christ and the message of the cross, God will draw people to Himself and change their hearts. He will cause them to be born again through the word of truth.

3) The Purpose of Regeneration.

Finally, the purpose of regeneration is that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. James here is drawing on an Old Testament theme. The Israelites were commanded to offer to God the firstfruits of their harvests. This was symbolic of the fact that everything belonged to God, and these firstfruits were set apart to be especially His. In this sense we are a kind of firstfruits of God’s creatures. We are His special creatures.

All of creation belongs to God. He created everything, and therefore He is the rightful owner and ruler over all. But then there are those whom God created anew, those of us who have been regenerated. He has made us new creatures. We are doubly His. We belong to Him because He gave us physical life, and we belong to Him because He gave us spiritual life. We are doubly His. We are the firstfruits of his creatures. This is the purpose of regeneration, that God is creating a people for Himself. He is bringing life to dead hearts and forming out of the mass of humanity a special people for His own glory.

We have seen that the origin of regeneration is God's own will. The means of regeneration is the word of truth—the Gospel. And the purpose of regeneration is that we should be a kind of firstfruits of God's creatures—we are His special people.

In closing, I hope that as you meditate on these verses and as you read over them in the future, that you will delight in the magnificent attributes of God. These verses reveal to us some awesome things about our God. He is the giver of all good gifts. He is unchanging. And He is the One who caused us to be born again.