

God's Good Gifts
James 1:16-18
ABC 2/24/19

Con artists are fascinating in that they can get people to believe the absurd. We've all heard of Charles Ponzi because his scheme became well known. I recently read the book, *The Whale of Wall Street*, about a Malaysian man who masterminded a multi-billion-dollar scam involving several countries. But my favorite con man is Victor Lustig (1890-1947). A Secret Service agent called him *the smoothest con man that ever lived*. In 1925, as France was recovering from the war, the upkeep of the Eiffel tower was an almost unbearable expense for the city of Paris. When Lustig read about this, he came up with his idea. After forging government credentials, he invited 6 scrap metal dealers to a secret meeting at an expensive hotel. He explained the City couldn't afford to keep the tower & had to sell it for scrap. He told them the secrecy of the meeting & all future dealings were due to the fact that the public might become distressed at the idea of removing it. During his time with the dealers, he kept watch on who would be the most likely to fall for his scam. He found his mark in André Poisson, an insecure man, who wished to increase his standing among the elite of Paris' business community. As he showed the most interest in purchasing the monument, Lustig decided to focus on him once all the dealers sent their bids to him. Arranging a private meeting with André, Lustig convinced him that he was a corrupt official, claiming the government didn't pay him enough salary. Believing the sale of the Eiffel Tower would secure him a place amongst the top businessmen, André agreed to pay a large bribe to secure ownership of the Eiffel Tower. However, once Lustig received his bribe & the funds for the monument's *sale*, he fled to Austria. When André realized he'd been conned, he was too embarrassed to tell the police & Lustig escaped with the money. One month later, he returned to Paris to try the scam again. This time it was reported to the police but he managed to escape. His audacity & nerve led him to be called *The Man Who Sold the Eiffel Tower, Twice*.¹ Con artists abound in the world, not just in the financial realm, but also in the spiritual realm. Satan is the master deceiver, **a liar & the father of lies** (Jn 8:44). His false prophets disguise themselves as angels of light (2 Cor 11:13-15). They

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor_Lustig

promise all kinds of things but lure people to their spiritual destruction. As we saw last week in Js 1:14 we deceive ourselves with our own evil desires. In other words, we can be our own worst con men. When we're going through tough times & trials we might begin to think, *God, I thought You were good & powerful. If You are, then why are You allowing me to go through this?* We begin to con ourselves into thinking that God isn't being good to us or He isn't able to prevent us from going through tough times. If we take the bait & believe the con we won't persevere in our trials. How do we avoid these cons & deceptions & endure our trials with God's joy? James tells us that to avoid being deceived, we must live by faith in God's sovereign goodness. James says, **12.**

He goes on to show in vss 13-15 that God doesn't tempt us with evil. When we sin, it comes from our own desires. If God isn't responsible for producing evil, then it follows that what He is responsible for creating & giving must only be good. But when we're under trials, we're susceptible to deception. At such times, we must affirm by faith that God is good & only gives us good gifts (17). This is supremely illustrated in our salvation, which clearly shows His sovereign goodness (18). We're constantly tempted to reverse the truths that James sets forth in vss 13-18. Rather than blaming our sin on ourselves, we're tempted to blame it on God or on others. Rather than assigning everything good in our lives to our loving heavenly Father, we want to take the credit ourselves. James wants us to avoid these common mistakes so we'll persevere under trials & receive **the crown of life.** **12-18** PRAY

1. Beware of Deception in Times of Trials 16

This is a hinge vs serving as a transition between vss 13-15 & 17-18. Believers, James says, must not be led astray into thinking that God is tempting them to evil; on the contrary, He's the giver of good gifts to His children. Vs 16 could be translated, *Do not allow yourselves to be deceived or don't deceive yourselves.*² This echoes the warning of Jer 17:9 that **the heart is more deceitful than all else.** James knows we have a frightening ability to fool & deceive ourselves to believe things simply because we want to believe them, even against overwhelming evidence. We're prone to deceive ourselves unless we constantly guard ourselves & stay in the truth. & the implication may

² Craig L Blomberg & Mariam J Kamell, *Exegetical Commentary on the NT, James*, p 73

be that deception already was taking place & immediate action must be taken to stop it. The thought had crept in that *if God is good & loving, why is He letting me suffer? If He really is omnipotent, He could stop it.* James reminds them that God is both good & sovereign. He never sends anything evil into our lives. He only gives good gifts. Deception must cease & desist. *Stop thinking wrongly*, is another way to phrase it, so that you can stop living wrongly. Your sin is the fruit of sinful thinking. The heart of man's problem is a problem with man's heart.

James commands us to not be deceived but he wasn't a cold-hearted, ivory tower theologian. He addresses his readers as **beloved brethren**. He loved these believers who were going through terrible trials. He knew that sound doctrine about God & His salvation is the most compassionate way to help people who are struggling through trials. God's truth gives us the rock we need to stand on in the midst of trials & temptations. God sends trials for His own sovereign, loving purposes. Amos asks, **If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?** (3:6). Although it was Satan that directly attacked Job, clearly he did it with God's permission. When Job's wife told him to curse God & die, Job wisely answered, **Shall we indeed accept good from God & not accept adversity?** (2:10). Paul came to see that his thorn in the flesh was a cause for rejoicing, because it kept him in humble dependence on God (2 Cor 12:7-10). So the **good gifts** that God sends may include extremely difficult trials. Whenever the Bible says, **Do not be deceived**, we need to perk up & pay attention. This is an area where we're prone to be conned. So when you face a difficult trial, be alert! You're susceptible to deception.

2. To Avoid Deception Believe in God's Goodness 17

The goodness of God is found from the 1st page of the Bible. Everything God creates is good. Gen 1 concludes with God's pronouncement that all He made was **very good**. Js 1:17 affirms God's very nature is, & always will be, good & giving & generous & gracious. Which ties in with vs 5 which says we should ask of *the giving God who gives to all men generously*. Vs 17 has been translated, *Every good gift & every perfect donation is from above*³ or *every good giving & every perfect gift*.⁴

³ Daniel M Doriani, *James*, p 39

⁴ Douglas Moo, *James*, p 77

But James is emphasizing the source of the gifts, not the number of them. God is good & all His gifts are good. When Satan originally tempted & deceived Eve, he did it by getting her to doubt God's goodness. He said, **Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?** (Gen 3:1). Of course, God hadn't said that, & Eve corrected Satan. But he persisted with his lie, **You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, & you will be like God, knowing good & evil** (3:4-5). The implication was, *God is holding back something good from you. Therefore, God Himself is not good.* She fell for this deception & we all know the consequences. So James affirms here, for people going through trials, **17**

James' point is that these good & perfect gifts, along with all of the many good things that God gives us to enjoy (the taste of good food, the love of our families, the beauty of His creation, & every wonderful experience in life) all of these good things come to us from a God whose very nature is good. As the Psalmist proclaims of God, **You are good & do good** (Ps 119:68). Our every need is fully underwritten by the endless & exactly appropriate gifts of God. In this giving, He is changeless. There's no way in which we might come to Him in our need & find that He's unwilling, unable, or unavailable to help. James states that all of the good things we experience come **down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.** This is the only time that God is called, **the Father of lights.** It refers to the fact that He created light & the heavenly bodies that give off light. James cites God's creation of the heavenly bodies as evidence of His power & continuing care for the world. The Creator is unlike His creation. He never changes position; He never alters either the fact or the intensity of His goodness. There's a lot going on here & much could be said. For example, **light** stands for that which is good in contrast to Satan's evil domain of darkness (Acts 26:18; Col 1:12-13). **Father** points not only to God's creative power, but also to His tender care for His creatures. When James says that with the **Father of lights, there is no variation or shifting shadow,** he's drawing a comparison or a contrast with the physical light we receive here on earth. We're subjected to constantly changing light. The sun rises, & our shadows fall to the west; it stands high at noon, brightening all; & as it sets, our shadows are to the east, until they fade to nothingness. Day & night, light perpetually changes. The moon waxes

& wanes. Light is reflected & refracted differently moment-by-moment. It varies on cloudy days, at night, & with the changing seasons. But it is not so with the goodness of God. God does not change like shifting shadows! God's goodness is always at high noon. When we experience what seem to be cloudy days or dark nights or wintry seasons, don't make the mistake of thinking God has changed in His essential goodness towards us. His nature & His purpose towards His children are steady & unchanging. He doesn't change like the heavens do. Therefore, we can trust Him at all times & in every difficult circumstance. This has 2 practical applications:

A) Understanding God's attributes is essential for our spiritual health. We must know God, not as we think He is or want Him to be, but as He's revealed Himself in the Bible. I've heard professing Christians say, *My God isn't a God of judgment; He's a God of love.* That's nice, but that god isn't the God of the Bible! He's a figment of your own imagination! The God of the Bible is both a God of judgment & of love. Or, there are Christians who dodge a difficult chapter like Rom 9, where Paul says of God, **He has mercy on whom He desires, & He hardens whom He desires** (9:18). They don't want to conceive of God as having the sovereign right to save whom He chooses & to harden others in their sin. But to dodge what the Bible says about God is to make God in your own image, which is idolatry. Two things will help you understand God's attributes. 1st, read the Bible over & over, asking as you read, *What does this teach me about You, God?* 2nd, read some good books on the attributes of God. JI Packer's classic, *Knowing God* is a good place to start. AW Pink's *The Attributes of God* is brief, but good. AW Tozer's *The Knowledge of the Holy* can be a bit mystical, but worth reading. Stephen Charnock's *The Existence & Attributes of God* is wordy, but a gold mine. He spends 146 pages on the goodness of God. Any good systematic theology (Charles Hodge, Louis Berkof, Wayne Grudem, MacArthur, etc) will have a section on God's attributes. There are also some excellent easy-to-read books on various attributes of God, such as RC Sproul's *The Holiness of God*, AW Pink's *The Sovereignty of God*, or John MacArthur's *The Love of God*. Understanding God & His attributes better gives you a firm footing when you encounter trials. We must get to know our heavenly Father, the **Father of lights** who is unchangeable.

B) Interpreting our circumstances in light of God's attributes is essential for our spiritual health. We

must know God, but when trials hit we have to process what we know in light of our difficult situation. By faith, we have to rehearse for ourselves what we know to be true over & over & over again. The psalms are full of this type of thing. The psalmist is in a crisis. He rehearses for himself what he knows about God's character & promises. By the end of the psalm his circumstances haven't changed, but his attitude & emotions have changed, because he's interpreted his circumstances in light of who God is. For example, in Ps 42 & 43, there's a refrain, where the psalmist talks to himself. 3x he asks, **Why are you in despair, O my soul? & why are you disturbed within me?** He answers himself, **Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, the help of my countenance & my God** (43:5; cf 42:5, 11). When you're on the emotional roller-coaster of a major trial, you have to endure by faith in God's Word, not by your feelings. Your feelings will be all over the board, but your faith must rest on the facts about God as declared in His Word of truth: He is good! No Christian can debate or doubt the unchangeable goodness of God.

An old music teacher was once asked in greeting, *What's the good news today?* The old man, without saying a word, walked across the room, picked up a tuning fork, & struck it. As the note sounded, he said, *That is A. It is A today, it was A 5,000 years ago, & it will be A 10,000 years from now. The soprano upstairs sings off-key, the tenor across the hall is out of tune.* He struck the note again & said, *That is A, my friend, & that's the good news today!*⁵

The good news today & for all eternity is this: God is infinitely good. He has never had & will never have more goodness than He has now. He is unchangeably good. He stands like an eternal sun in a cloudless sky radiating unbroken goodness upon us. God will always be good to us.

3. God's Goodness Seen in our Salvation As we go through trials, it's easy to think that either God isn't good or He must not be sovereign. To stand firm & not be deceived, we must, by faith, cling to both His goodness & His absolute sovereignty. James affirms God's sovereignty in salvation as the bedrock truth to get you through your trials. If God is the source of your salvation, then He isn't going to abandon you when you face trials. As Paul put it, **For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus** (Phil 1:6; cf Rom 8:28-36.) Is salvation a **good thing** & a **perfect gift**? Of course! Then it's from above, granted or

⁵ Gary Vanderet, *Discovery Papers*, "The Skill of Resisting Temptation," May 4, 1986

given by the Father. Is faith in Christ a good thing? Yes! So where is it from? It's from above. As Jesus said in Jn 6:65, **no one can come to me unless it has been granted or given** (same root word as Js 1:17) **him from the Father**. Every good thing given is from above, from God, including our salvation! James makes 2 points here in vs **18**.

A. Since salvation is from God, He'll care for you through every trial. In the exercise of His will, He brought us forth by the word of truth... (18a). **Brought us forth** makes it plain that James isn't speaking of a natural birth, with human parents, but of a supernatural birth, with a divine Parent, the Father. The ground of this supernatural birth is the Father's own will. James gives great emphasis to **of His own will** in his sentence structure. NIV says, **He chose to give us birth**. NET puts it this way, **By His sovereign plan He gave us birth**. & the Amplified reads, **it was of His own (free) will that He gave us birth**. This new birth & our natural birth are alike in that the decision is that of the parent, not of the child. Birth is something that happens to a child as a result of decisions & actions made by others, the parents. Earlier this month, Raphael Samuel sued his parents for having given birth to him without his consent. He says, *I want everyone in India and the world to realize that they are born without their consent. I want them to understand that they do not owe their parents anything, he said. If we are born without our consent, we should be maintained for our life. We should be paid by our parents to live.*⁶ OK, he's got his own agenda, but he's right in that we have nothing to do with our natural birth. Likewise, our 2nd birth is also outside of us as it is accomplished by God. Spiritually & doctrinally, the new birth (or birth from above) belongs with all those passages of Scripture which unveil the secret story lying behind our conversion. From the point of view of God's decision, Jesus said, **You did not choose me, but I chose you** (Jn 15:16). Yet many of us remember with great clarity the day & hour when we chose Him! But since we're taught that **no one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him** (Jn 6:44), & that the very faith we exercise when we believe in Jesus is the Father's gift to us (Eph 2:8; Phil 1:29), we learn that behind our choice, making it possible & making it real, is the wonder that God 1st chose us. This is what James refers to when he says, **In the exercise of His will He brought us forth**. The

⁶ www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47154287

decision was His. Our experience of conversion, of committing our lives to Christ, of receiving Him into our hearts, all was resulting from His decision & action. No child has ever been born into the world by its own will or plan. Its conception, gestation, & birth are completely out of its consciousness & control. It's merely the passive recipient of the will & action of the parents. Just as certainly, no person wills, much less creates, a new spiritual nature within himself.⁷ Not only theologically but logically, that's the only way life could be given to those who are dead. The dead have no awareness or understanding of sin, no desire to turn from it (Jn 3:19–20), & no power or resources to change if they wanted to. But they don't even know they're dead. Regeneration could only happen by the sovereign will & power of God, the Source & Giver of spiritual life.

Many believers would rewrite the vs to read, *In the exercise of our free will, He brought us forth...* They make our will the decisive factor in salvation. They say, *God has done everything He can do for your salvation. The deciding vote is up to you.* But the emphasis throughout the Bible isn't on human will in salvation, but on God's will in our salvation. When we let the Scriptures speak for themselves the unmistakable emphasis of this text & many others is on God's free will as the gracious foundation of our salvation. Someone may be thinking, *But what about all the vss that say we must believe?* Those are in the Bible, too, & every Christian knows that someone must believe in Christ to be saved. Jn 1:12 tells us, **But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.** *Aha, you say, you can't just say this being born again is "of God" because saying we must believe means it's of our will, right?* What's the next vs say? **Who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.** That doesn't contradict the prior vs because all who become God's children do believe, but it does clarify that this birth ultimately is not of or from human origin (says it 3 ways), it's of & from God. The belief in vs 12 is genuine but vs 13 is its origin.

When God went to Adam & Eve after they sinned, He didn't present them with the package & ask, *What do you think? Would you like for Me to clothe you with animal skins & to send a Savior by the seed of the woman, or not? You decide!* When God called Abram, He didn't present His plan &

⁷ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. *James*, p 59

then ask Abram for his decision. God called Abram & told him what He (God) would do & what Abram should do in response. When the Lord knocked Saul (Paul) to the ground & blinded him, He didn't say, *Would you like to decide for Jesus now?* He said, **Get up & enter the city, & it will be told you what you must do** (Acts 9:6). God told Ananias, who was to go to Paul, **Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles & kings & the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake** (9:15-16). Jesus emphasized the same truth, that God's will is the decisive factor in our salvation. He said, **All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; & no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, & anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him** (Mt 11:27). Sinners are spiritually blinded by Satan, **so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ** (2 Cor 4:4). It requires the sovereign will of God, who commanded light to shine out of darkness, **to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ** (2 Cor 4:6).

Those who argue against God's sovereignty in salvation say God's command that we believe the gospel implies our ability to keep the command. Otherwise, He'd be mocking us to tell us to believe when we can't believe. But immediately after Jesus said that no one could know the Father, except those to whom the Son wills to reveal Him, He said, **Come unto Me, all who are weary & heavy-laden, & I will give you rest** (Mt 11:28). Would anyone dare to say that Jesus was mocking them? With the command to believe, God imparts His life-giving, eye-opening power to all He has chosen. Jesus commanded dead Lazarus to come forth from his tomb. Was He mocking him? No, because with the command, Jesus sent His life-giving power, so that Lazarus could hear the command & obey it. He didn't sit in the tomb debating, *Should I decide for Jesus or not?* Jesus commanded the man with the withered hand in the synagogue to stretch out his hand (Lk 6:10). Was He mocking this man & telling him in front of everyone to do something he wasn't able to do? No, because with the command, Jesus imparted His healing power to enable the man to obey. So, yes, God calls on sinners to repent & believe the gospel. You cannot be saved unless you repent & believe. But when you repent & believe, it isn't at all due to your free will or ability. You were dead in your sins & loving it (Eph 2:1-3; Jn 3:19-20). The only reason you responded in faith is that in the exercise of

God's will, He brought you from death to life (Jn 1:15, 18) by the power of His **word of truth**, the gospel. You weren't the deciding factor in your salvation. God was! James sounds a lot like Paul, doesn't he? You were saved because **in the exercise of His will**, God **brought you forth by the word of truth**. This **word** is the instrument through which God brings people to life. All other occurrences of this phrase in the NT refer to the gospel as the agent of salvation (2 Cor 6:7; Eph 1:13; Col 1:5; 2 Tim 2:15).⁸ **By the word of truth** could be rendered literally *by the truth's word*, that is, by the Word of God, by Scripture. Believers are born again, regenerated, by the power of God's Word. It's the gospel that is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16). It's God's Word that is living & active & powerful & sharper than any 2-edged sword & can cut through to our innermost thoughts (Heb 4:12). Faith comes by hearing & hearing by what? The Word (Rom 10:17). This is one of the most glorious truths in the whole Bible. Salvation is truly all of God. Until new life is given we are dead in our trespasses & sins (Eph 2:1). We're as unable as anything that is dead to respond to God in repentance & faith. If anything is to be done, He must do it. If any blessing or change is to come to us, it must come from outside of us. Here's the greatness of God's mercy, the sufficiency of His strength, & the depth of the His humility: He's come right down to us in our death; He has raised us up into life; & it's all due to a rich mercy prompted by a great love (Eph 2:1,4-5). It's no more possible for us to be agents or contributors to our new birth than it was for us to be so in our natural birth. All the work, from initial choice to completed deed, is His. But there's something else as well: inherent in this great truth of the new birth is the security of our salvation. Were salvation to depend on my choice, it would be as uncertain as my will which fluctuates, blows hot & cold, & reflects my divided, fallen nature. But it's His choice of His own will that He brought us forth by the word of truth. & until His will changes, His word alters, or His truth is proved false, our salvation cannot be threatened or forfeited. Because of that, you can trust Him to take care of you in times of severe trials. This is the kindness & goodness of God. As the gospel wins the hearts of sinners, they freely choose the new life that He already willed for them. Because our life rests on God's

⁸ Moo, p 79

unchanging goodness, not our own changeable choices, it is secure. That is God's gift & it proves His good intent in our trials. Since salvation is from God, He'll see us through every trial.

B. Since God saves you for His purpose, He'll care for you through every trial. We owe our very salvation to God's sovereign will, so we can confidently entrust all other things to Him as well, including our tough times. Vs 18 continues, **so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.** This goes back to the OT requirement that Israel bring the 1st portion of their crop as a thank-offering to God. Although salvation is the greatest possible blessing a human can receive, its primary purpose isn't to benefit us but to fulfill God's sovereign purpose of believers becoming, **a kind of first fruits among His creatures.** This has 2 practical implications for us, who are God's 1st fruits:

1) As God's 1st fruits, He owns you & He's free to use you as He chooses. Since He saved you by bringing you from death to life by the exercise of His will, you are not your own. You've been bought with the blood of Christ (Gal 3:13). Therefore, you must present yourself & everything you have to God as a thank-offering, to use as He chooses. Have you done that? Do you live that way?

2) As God's 1st fruits, you're to bear fruit for Him. Offering the 1st fruits to God meant there would be more to follow. Vs 18 reminds us of Jesus' words to His disciples, **You did not choose Me but I chose you, & appointed you why? That you would go & bear fruit, & that your fruit would remain** (Jn 15:16). God saved you so you would bear fruit for Him. If you're living for yourself, spending all of your time, money, & efforts to make life more comfortable for yourself, you're serving yourself, not the Lord. James wants you to realize that if God has imparted new life to you, then you are His 1st fruits. Especially in trials, your aim should be to bear fruit for Him & to bring glory to His name. Therefore, **2.**

God has a goal in mind for those that He's brought forth & called & chosen. He has a purpose & it's not to sit around & do nothing but being the frozen chosen. No, we're part of a harvest & if God saves people through the **word of truth**, we need to not only pray to the Lord of the harvest, but be laborers in His fields & proclaiming His gospel. If understanding the truths in these vss doesn't motivate you to want to serve such a merciful & glorious Savior, you haven't understood them.

God took counsel with Himself & resolved that He wouldn't leave sinners in their plight. He decided to grant them spiritual life by **the word of truth**. This rebirth keeps sin from giving birth to death. It makes God's children the **first fruits** of His creation. In whatever trials you go through, you can resist spiritual con artists by holding firmly to God's goodness & His sovereignty, especially as seen in your salvation. James says God's people are His 1st fruits. We're the 1st & the best of His produce. He will prove faithful. He'll care for us year by year, even as He cared for Israel in the wilderness. This is what the tests should teach us. If we fail, our failure teaches us to turn to God for mercy, as He offers it in the gospel. Then as we persevere with Him in love, come what may, we'll receive the **crown of life** that He's promised.

Are you doubting God's goodness this morning? Then hear God's Word. **16**

& let me give you four reasons why: 1) Only good comes from God. *Every good & perfect gift is from above.* 2) Our Gift-giver is the good Father of creation, **the Father of lights**. 3) His goodness will never change. He *does not change like shifting shadows.* & 4) If this isn't enough, His goodness is in accord with, & an extension of, the goodness we experienced in salvation when *He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all He created.* God's goodness is the key to our spiritual sanity. God is sovereignly good! Since this is so, He is worthy of all trust & all glory & all praise at all times, even in the midst of trials.