

Steadfast Joy: The Book of James

Every Good Gift

James 1:16-18

Mark Vroegop

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures (James 1:16–18).

Dustin Crowe, one of our first residents, is a previous staff member at College Park who now serves as a pastor at Pennington Park Church (our first church plant in Fishers). He has an excellent new book coming out in October entitled, *“The Grumbler’s Guide to Giving Thanks.”*

Man, do I resonate with what he says in the introduction. And I’m pretty sure you do as well.

People are cranky today. Turn on the TV or scan social media and you’ll encounter a choir of voices fighting, disputing, criticizing, and complaining. It seems like people look for something to be negative about. Cynicism and pessimism abound. Jealousy and entitlement tempt us daily. These sins have always existed, but it feels like they permeate life today...In a fallen world and in sinful hearts, grumbling is common. I do it. You do it. I groan quicker than I give thanks. I ask God “why” more than I tell Him thanks. But I don’t want to stay this way. I know growing in gratitude is a better alternative, for both me and those around me.¹

Dustin wrote these words well before COVID, social distancing, racial tensions, and political campaigning. They are particularly true during the season in which we are living. The reason should be relatively obvious: There’s more to complain about when life is hard. It’s easier to complain when you are in pain.

Last week, I attempted to unpack the way in which **pain creates blame** when it comes to temptation. In verses 13-15, James cautioned us about allowing hardships to cause us to blame God for the temptations that come our way. Instead, he pointed us toward our desires. And I hope that in the last week you’ve seen the value of these four application points:

- Be aware of how temptation happens
- Ask yourself what you want
- Affirm God’s ability to help you

¹ Dustin Crowe, *The Grumblers Guide to Giving Thanks*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2020).

- Act in faith

Our text this week moves from the negative issue of temptation to a positive perspective of considering the good gifts from God.

Remember that James wrote to people who were experiencing significant levels of hardship—even persecution. In this book, he’s calling them (and us) to embrace a mindset of steadfast joy. In the midst of pain, it’s easy to slip into a pattern of grumbling. We can forget to celebrate the grace of God.

James 1:16-18 calls us to turn our focus away from the trials and temptations with this encouragement: **Don’t miss God’s gifts.**

Let’s look at three reminders —things we probably know but can easily forget when it comes to the good gifts from God.

Reminder #1: God’s Gifts Can Be Missed

If you’ve been tracking with our study, I hope you are starting to see a familiar pattern in how James shepherds people. He usually starts with a strong command or a warning. For example, if you were to search the book of James for the use of the word “let,” you’d find the word used fourteen times. Six of those references are in chapter one:

- let steadfastness have its full effect (James 1:4)
- if you lack wisdom, let him ask God (1:5)
- let him ask in faith (1:6)
- let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation (1:9)
- let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God...” (1:13)

Verse 16 is another command. James doesn’t use the word “let” here, but it’s clearly a warning. “Don’t be deceived, my beloved brothers.”

In order to understand this caution, we have to look at both the words that are used and the context. It’s meant to be a transitional statement. In other words, it connects the previous verses with verses 17-18. How so? Well, temptation could cause you to focus on what is bad, broken, and sinful. Even worse, it might cause you to lay the blame at God’s feet. Last week learned why that would be wrong thinking. But there’s more.

You would miss the good gifts from God.

Pain, sorrow, and frustration can create a scenario in which we don’t see things clearly. That’s why James uses the word “deceived.” The word means either to be misled from what is true or to pursue a course of action that isn’t right. Being deceived can involve both a belief system and a series of steps. In

other words, deception is both what you think and what you do. Two examples from other places in the New Testament:

- *If we say we have no sin, we **deceive** ourselves, and the truth is not in us* (1 John 1:8).
- *Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,¹³ while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, **deceiving and being deceived*** (2 Tim. 3:12–13).

James tries to lovingly (“beloved brothers”) caution us that suffering and hardship can cause us to draw the wrong conclusions about God and his goodness. We can easily fall prey to unbelief—embracing something that just isn’t true.

Have you ever had a tense conversation with someone you love and found yourself having to say: “Wait a minute. I’m for you. I’m trying to help you. I’m not the enemy here.” In the heat of the moment and with the internal tension of the conflict, it’s easy to forget what we know is true. That’s what James has in mind here.

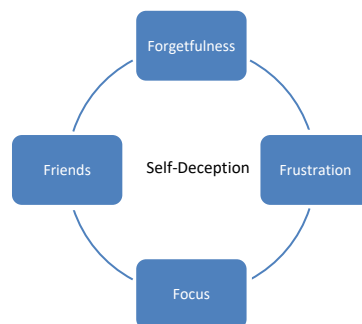
This is a familiar pattern. For example, in Exodus 15-16 the people of Israel grumbled against Moses, Aaron, and the Lord. Despite being delivered from Egypt, seeing the ten plagues, walking through the Red Sea, and even seeing God’s provision of water at Marah, they still grumbled. They said terrible things:

...and the people of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Ex. 16:3).

And Paul tells the divided church at Corinth to look at the example in the Old Testament for a warning.

We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:9-12).

The people of God are often self-deceived and miss the gifts of God. Let me give a few ways:



- Forgetfulness – we fail to rehearse what God has done

- Frustration – we grieve what is missing or how often something’s been happening
- Focus – we fixate on the negative
- Friends – we gather with others who make our deception worse

In the same way that we need to be aware of the possibility of wrong desires, we also need to be aware of the possibility of pain creating a pattern of self-deception. It’s possible to miss the gifts.

Reminder #2: God’s Gifts Point Us to Him

Once we realize the possibility of self-deception, what’s next? James provides a wonderful description of the way in which the gifts of God point us back to him. In the same way that temptations might cause us to think incorrectly about God, gifts can tell us something correct about him. Let’s make a few observations from verse 17.

First, notice the use of the word “every,” the repetition of the word “gift,” and the fact that James describes the gifts as “good” *and* “perfect.” Coming on the heels of the discussion about temptation, James wants us to see the number and quality of the gifts that we might miss. There doesn’t seem to be a significant distinction between “good” and “perfect.” It appears that James simply wants to remind us that there are many gifts around us.

I suspect that he knows, by experience, that it is very easy for us to take for granted the grace-gifts that we experience every day. In some cases, we don’t know how valuable they are until their gone. Life is filled with many good and perfect gifts.

Secondly, James tells us (and this is his main point) that every one of them comes from God. James uses language as if the gifts are being sent from above. It’s like gifts that are arriving—one after the other. But the gifts are not to be the primary focus. The good and perfect gifts are designed to direct our attention back to God. Gifts are meant to be conduits not merely for our enjoyment but for God’s exaltation. As I said in a sermon series on gratitude—“when you see grace, say thanks.”

During a pastors’ meeting this week, Alex Anderson was telling us how his soul was refreshed by some time in the woods. He experienced the “grace” of creation. Here’s his perspective: “Nature quiets my soul and does a soft reset on my perspective. It breaks my normal busy cycle and slows me down helping me see joy. It’s as if I walk into the woods, throw busyness, frustration, and negativity into the fire and walk out refreshed, reset, and joyful!”

Third, those gifts come from “the Father of lights.” This is a reference to God’s role as creator. It’s designed to show God’s power. James loves the book of Isaiah. I wonder if he had Isaiah 40:25-31 in mind:

To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power, not one is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God”? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint (Isa. 40:25–31).

And finally, he adds something really important: “with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” The NIV says “who does not change like shifting shadows.” Everything in creation changes. The entire created order is motion—sunrise, sunset, tides, seasons, birth/death, getting older. Part of the tension of the world is living in this constant state of change.

James points us to the character of God which is unchanging and eternal. This is more than a theology lesson, it’s a reminder of something really important—something you may need to hear today. God can be trusted. He is always faithful. His ways are always good.

And while we know that’s true, sometimes it’s helpful to be reminded that “every good and perfect gift comes from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”

Sometimes it is not only helpful but necessary to rehearse the “good and perfect gifts” we’ve received.

And the greatest of those gifts that are linked to God’s faithfulness is the redemption that we have in Christ.

Reminder #3: God’s Gifts are Grounded in Redemption

The final focal point is on the gift of the new birth. James points us this direction because there is no greater example of God as the giver of amazing gifts which cause us to trust him than the redemption that is offered to us through Christ.

This one reason why Christians should approach suffering and hardship differently than the rest of the world. So, let me ask you a question: “What grade would you give Christians during this pandemic as it relates to suffering?” I find it to be a convicting thought, and it motivates me to pursue a greater level of faithfulness this week.

If you are not a Christian, what I’m about to share with you is the basics of what it means to be Christian. It’s not only a person’s greatest need; it’s also the greatest gift God could ever give.

The text says that “he brought us forth by the word of truth.” James is talking about the miracle of being “born again.” It’s how the Bible describes what happens to sinful people when they put their trust in Christ. God makes them new people—from the inside-out. Being born again means that a person who was once God’s enemy is now his son or daughter. It’s a spiritual change of the mind, the heart, and the will.

Notice that it happens by the word of truth. Paul said, “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). The miracle of the new birth happens because of the Word. God sends his Word, and you hear what you wouldn’t have heard before.

And it all happens because of God’s will: “Of his own will he brought us forth...” It’s a stunning thought to consider that God was the one pursuing you. He didn’t grace you with the new birth because of something deserving in you. On the contrary, he pursued you because he is a good God.

But it doesn’t stop there! God plan in redemption is not only to redeem his people, but also to redeem the entire created order. You see, sin affected everything. God is on a mission to make everything good and perfect again. That’s why James uses the word “firstfruits.” It’s a sample of what is yet to come from the full harvest.

In other words, the conversion of individual people is a reminder that God is moving to redeem the entire world. By looking at the miracle of conversion and celebrating the faithfulness of God in the new birth, we are reminded that he’s not finished! God is at work—in you, in me, and in the world.

Sunday is the celebration of that reality. We rehearse the gospel. We remind each other about what is true. We reconnect with the truths that are underneath our lives. We re-engage with the work of God in the world.

How does this connect to gratitude? This text reminds us that (1) it’s way too easy to miss the gifts of God, (2) that those gifts are meant to point us to God, and (3) that the greatest of those gifts is our redemption.

Are you forgetful? Are you frustrated? Are you focused on the wrong things? Are your friends bringing you down?

Let me encourage you to rehearse, right now, as many good and perfect gifts that you’ve received this week as you can. Or, just rehearse the ones from today. Or even, right now. What can you celebrate about your redemption that you might be tempted to take for granted?

Life is hard. But let’s be sure we don’t miss God’s good gifts.

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