

James 1:16-18

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 October 2021

Preacher: Zac Skilling

[0 : 00] Good morning, CFC. Go ahead and take your copy of God's Word and open up to the book of James. Still in chapter 1, we'll be looking at verses 16 through 18 this morning.

Now, this text for today picks up exactly where we left off last week. We saw that God tempts no one because he is inexperienced with evil.

James makes that very clear in verses 13 through 15. And James alludes to the fact that God is holy, that he's without sin in those verses as well.

But now he's going to talk about that other side of the coin, right? Last week we talked about that side of the coin that says God's not evil. Now we're going to see the side of the coin that says, but God is this.

We're going to see who God is. And so James writes, again, in James 1, starting in verse 16, James writes, as a transition statement, Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.

[1 : 06] 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.

There's a book called Lone Survivor. It was made into a movie starring Mark Wahlberg, and I'm sure a lot of you are familiar with it. It's a true story of former Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell.

And on a mission in Afghanistan, Marcus Luttrell was out with three of his closest friends, and they were all overwhelmed by hundreds of Taliban. His friends all died.

A helicopter was sent in to save them full of other Navy SEALs, but they were also shot down, hence the title Lone Survivor. Marcus is the only one that made it out of this tragedy.

[2 : 04] And how did he survive? Well, after the firefight, he hid in the wilderness for some time. He was shot up. He was starving. He was thirsty. He had to crawl everywhere.

They didn't have his gun anymore. You can imagine the fear, the panic, the feeling of helplessness. And eventually, he came across a local, an Afghani found him.

And for those of you who know the movie, you can remember this scene. Marcus freaks out. He goes for his grenade. The only thing he's got left. And he's holding it, right? Speaking the universal language. Hey, you mess with me.

I'll finish this both kind of thing, right? A serious moment. He's got this look of fear, confusion, anxiety, angst in his eye. And you can imagine why he's freaking out, right?

He doesn't know this man. He doesn't know who he is. He's not sure if he's Taliban or not. He doesn't know if he can trust him. But the story goes on.

[3 : 03] And this particular Afghani ends up being one of the good guys, so to speak. He saves Marcus's life. And Marcus is able to trust him because he has to in order to survive.

Now, why am I mentioning all this? What does this have to do with James? I want to suggest that we often react to God's working in our life like Marcus does with this local Afghani.

We respond in defensiveness. We get angsty. We react. We don't know if we can trust God and what he's doing. Because oftentimes when he is at work in our life, it is very uncomfortable.

It's very trying. He takes us places where we don't always want to go. And we get defensive. And so when he does this, we are tempted by our flesh.

Our reaction is not to jump into the arms of the Lord, but to get defensive, to grab our grenades, so to speak. God, I don't want this trial, all right? Back off is kind of our posture.

[4 : 05] And why do we do that? It's because we do not trust God is who he says he is. We do not trust that the trials he allows us to have are for our good.

And you can imagine if Marcus had known this local who helped him, if Marcus knew that he was good, that he was wanting to help Marcus, he wouldn't have gotten defensive. He would have jumped into his arms.

Their encounter would have looked very different. And this leads me to the first point. This one's quick. But point number one, James does not want us to be deceived.

So James does not want us to be deceived. What does he not want us to be deceived about? He does not want us to be deceived about who God is. Now, this verse could have been attached to last week's sermon.

In fact, this whole sermon could have been one sermon with last week and be longer because it's all intimately connected. But this verse in particular, verse 16, as I said, it's a transitional verse.

[5 : 08] It ties last week's text with this week's text. This is the flipping of the coin, right? Now we're seeing the other side of the coin. God's not this, but he is this.

So practically, this verse, verse 16, means that we should know who God is. We should study his word to discover himself as he has revealed himself.

And then we would respond to God's trials so differently if we trusted him, not with the defensive postures, but with open arms begging to cling to him. The whole word of God convincingly, thoroughly, and unambiguously proves, demonstrates, and shows that God is good.

We have every reason to trust him and turn to him. And the book of James is part of that witness. James gives us some specific reasons to trust God. According to James, verse 17, God is the giver of every good and perfect gift.

And this is the second point. God is the giver of every good and perfect gift. So looking at the first half of verse 17, James writes, Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.

[6 : 28] Again, last week we saw that God does not tempt, but now James is telling us what he does do. He gives every good and perfect gift. They all come from above, verse 17, according to James.

Meaning, if there is anything good in your life, anything that is perfect, it can only come from the Father. And that makes sense too. If we are sinners by nature and live in a fallen world like we established last week, then how could anything good or perfect come from us who are anything but good or perfect?

So James is saying one of the proofs that God is without sin is that God gives good and perfect gifts. An evil being cannot give good and perfect gifts, nor can a bad being give, or excuse me, a good being give bad and imperfect gifts.

And this is just as Jesus taught, right? A good tree can only bear good fruit. A bad tree can only bear bad fruit. That's Matthew 5. This also sounds similar to Jesus' other teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

And again, you'll recall me saying James' epistle and the Sermon on the Mount are very intertwined. But in Matthew 7, verses 9 through 11, Jesus says to his disciples, So Jesus is saying that God is so much better than any evil being.

[8 : 09] He's not saying that wicked and unrepentant men give good things. He's saying, hey, if even they give the appearance of giving good gifts, how much more so will your good heavenly Father give you good things himself?

How much greater must he be as a gift giver? And he's so much greater. Now looking back at James, verse 17 is intimately connected to verse 4 as well from our first week of James.

I talked about the importance of that Greek word that week, teleon, the Greek word for perfect or whole or complete. And this word is a big deal in the Sermon on the Mount.

It's an even bigger deal in the epistle of James. It runs throughout the entire book. James says in chapter 1, verse 4, And let trials have their full effect in order that you may be perfect or teleon and whole, lacking in nothing.

In our text today, verse 17, James says, Every good gift and every perfect teleon gift is from above. It's the same word again.

[9 : 15] And this forms a sort of inclusio, right? A bookend. So this is telling us, this is cuing us that our text today is wrapping up what was started in week one.

James is tying it all together. This is all running from the same thought, the same vein that we saw in verse 1 through 4 in the first week. What James is saying then is that trials produce, excuse me,

trials themselves are good because they are from God who is good.

And these trials produce in us good, which is for our good. Okay, that's a pretty decent summary of James 1, 1 through 18.

Our good, specifically in James' context, is our being made whole, our being made perfect, our progression toward that wholeness and perfection we have been talking about.

And again, as a way of a reminder, wholeness captures the idea of total devotion to God. In the weeks to come, you'll see how James looks at wholeness primarily as obedience.

[10:25] The more we obey God, the more we are demonstrating that we are on the path to wholeness, the path to perfection. And James' main variable that he looks at to determine if a man is whole or perfect is not whether or not he is reformed, whether or not he homeschools his kids, or whether or not he has the right books on his shelf.

James doesn't look at these, but in James 3, 2, we find out what James looks at. He looks at whether or not we control our tongues. James 3, 2 says, For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect, there's that word again, teleon, he is a perfect man, also able to bridle his whole body.

So notice that if we control our tongue, we control our whole bodies. Our entire being is under control as evidenced by our tongue.

And this is right along with Jesus' teachings. In Matthew 12, verse 34, Jesus says, For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. Our speech reveals our heart.

Our very nature is shown in our speech. Again, James does not expect us, nor does he say that we can reach this perfection or wholeness in this life.

[11:53] He says in James 5, 16, Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another. So obviously, he has room for sin. He's not saying this is something we attain here and now.

But he is saying that we are constantly called to be striving after this state of wholeness and perfection. We are to obey God in this life and grow in that obedience.

Now that all sounds good. God is good. He's the giver of good and perfect gifts. But what if he changes? What if God is having a bad day?

He gets a little emotional. And he decides that he feels like sending us bad and evil gifts. Or if this were a business deal, you might be asking, What guarantees do I have that God will come through? And this takes us to point number three. Point number three, looking at the second half of verse 17. God is immutable. God is immutable.

[12:52] Which is just a fancy term for meaning he does not change. So second half of verse 17. James writes, So these good and perfect gifts coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

He always is who he says he is. If he was good yesterday, then he will be good today, and he will be good tomorrow. Not one variation, not one change, even in the shadow that he casts.

Think about that. No sun or anything causes even a shadow of change. Nothing can move him or cause him to be moved. And this is further vindication of God's holiness.

We talked about that last week. He does not change, and that is such good news. And James' proof for God being without change is a packed illusion.

So James refers to God as the Father of lights. And lights is plural in the Greek, and it should be in your ESV translations as well, though some make it singular.

[14:02] But this is important to note, because Father of light, singular, Father of light, carries the idea of God being the Father of truth, which he is, of course.

But that is not James' point. James says specifically the Father of lights, plural. That word for lights is often referring to the stars in Greek literature.

So James is getting at the idea that God is the Father of the stars. And the other important term here is Father. For Hebrews, and remember, James is writing to dispersed Jewish Christians, so Hebrew people.

Right? So for these people, for Hebrew people, the name Father for God almost always carries the idea of God being the creator of the universe. He fathered everything.

A quick example of this is Job chapter 38, verse 28, which says, Does the rain have a father? Who fathers the drops of dew? And the obvious answer is, God, the Father brings about the rain and the dew because he created it.

[15:14] And if it is not clear already that James is talking about God as the creator of the stars and planets, even the Greek words for variation and for shadow do to change are phrases that were used in Greek astrology.

They use these words to describe the orderly and periodic movement of the stars and planets. So James' point is that we can look at how the stars and planets are moving.

They go one place and then they go to another. Some are orderly, some are chaotic, but it is God who directs them all. In other words, James is saying that God does not change the way the stars and the planets do.

And that was kind of a common thought in the Jewish world. Philo is a first century Jew, not a Christ follower, but a contemporary of Christ. He made the same point by contrasting God with creation. Philo said, every created thing must necessarily undergo change, for this is its property, even as unchangeableness is the property of God.

[16:20] So you see the contrast. Creation changes, but the creator does not change. Again, last week I asked you to do this. I'm going to do it again this week.

Put yourself in the shoes of dispersed Jewish Christians that James is writing to. You have been driven from Jerusalem by Herod, which we saw in Acts 12.

You face all the issues of displacement, no job, likely separated from friends and maybe even some family. poverty has struck you, which we're going to see more in the weeks to come of that.

But in general, from an earthly vantage point, things are not going well for you. As a Jew, you grew up reading about the Exodus and how God would deliver his people from the dispersion, and yet here you are, dispersed throughout the nations.

You'd probably be tempted to wonder, when did God change? But James says to you, God is without variation or shadow due to change.

[17:21] The huge implication being that God will keep his word, that God has not forgotten about you, that God will still gather his people to rule and reign in the new heaven and the new earth with our conquering Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a message that God still loves you, God will still deliver you, and God will still uphold you.

That was James' message for these dispersed Jewish Christians, and that message is one that we need to remind ourselves of today, a gospel message to cling to for sure.

Now here's something that I think is truly remarkable. We are wrapping up James' opening section where he defends the holiness of God in light of temporary afflictions and temptations.

We have seen that James has argued for this by citing the character of God, the comparison to the stars and the planets. And he has even demonstrated that sin comes from us and our sin nature.

But now, this is the remarkable thing, James also uses us, we, the believers, in the midst of sojourning, as his final proof that God will come through.

[18:39] God will establish a new heaven and a new earth with his church, and the evidence for this is the fruit we are already bearing as believers whom God has indwelt with his Holy Spirit.

So this takes us to the fourth point and the final, and we're going to spend the most time here, but the fourth point, we are the firstfruits of things to come.

I'll repeat that, we are the firstfruits of things to come. So looking at verse 18, James writes, There's a handle on the mug that threw me off.

All right. So notice that it's from God's own will that we are brought forth. A decisive statement that makes it plain that God is for our good.

He has given us new life. In fact, the phrase brought us forth could be translated as he gave birth. So it seems like James intends the contrast with verse 15 from last week.

[19:53] So if you recall, a sinful man gives birth to sin, which produces death. But here in verse 18, what does God give birth to? He gives birth to life. And God does this through the word of truth, meaning the gospel that is the scriptures, all of it.

Paul affirms this. Romans 10, 17, he writes, So faith comes from hearing and hearing from the word of Christ. So we are reborn, as James reminds us.

No longer are we dead men walking who give birth to sin, which results in eternal life or eternal death. Rather, the gospel, and a quick summary, by the way, so we fell in the garden into sin and deserve eternal torment and death because we disobeyed our creator, God.

But God, being rich in mercy, has made a way for our sin to be paid by sending his son, Jesus, to bear the wrath that we deserve. And Christ is now risen, ascended, seated at the right hand of God,

the Father, and God the Son will return to subjugate all things to himself as he creates the new heaven and the new earth.

So this gospel, which I just summarized, is already going forth in this world. It is by this gospel that we are brought into new life. It is by this gospel that God is already beginning to make things anew, the already but not yet.

[21 : 20] Or as James so concisely puts it, we are the firstfruits in verse 18. Now, secular pagans use this term, firstfruits, *aparche*, as a word to describe either the best offering they had of their crops, or in other cases, they use this word to describe the best people they had to enslave to the service of a deity or an idol.

In the New Testament, however, this word is almost always used as a name for Christians. You and I who are in Christ, we are firstfruits. And this is not shocking because like a temple slave, a secular temple slave who is committed to worshipping a false deity, we are called to love the one true God with our wholeness as slaves or as firstfruits.

These words were often used interchangeably, both in the Bible and in secular writings. And again, you'll recall from week one, James refers to himself as a slave of God in verse one.

But the point here is this, our salvation is a picture and an assurance of good things to come from our Father. It is amazing that we were dead sinners who rebelled against God, but now we claim to love Him and serve Him.

That's unbelievable. And maybe you have forgotten just how bad we were before Christ, but Paul's description doesn't hold any punches. In Ephesians chapter 2, verses 1 through 3, he writes, and you were, so past tense, referring to the church prior to Christ, so you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, meaning we followed Satan.

[23 : 12] The spirit, so Satan, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind.

So using that wholeness language before Christ, we were wholly committed to sin, death, and wickedness by nature children of wrath. So how on earth did God change us?

How on earth do we now love him? And we love him because he first loved us. God foretold how he would change us.

The prophet Jeremiah records the word of the Lord. Jeremiah 32, verse 40, God says, I will make with them an everlasting covenant that it will not turn away from doing good to them.

And I will put the fear of me in their hearts that they may not turn from me. So notice that. It will not cease from doing good to us, the church, us who are in the everlasting covenant, the new covenant.

[24 : 23] He has put the fear of himself in us so that we do not turn from him, but that we remain, that we persevere, that we remain faithful. So we know with confidence that God will bring about this new heaven and new earth with all the church ransomed because God does not change, because God is good, because God is the creator and rules everything.

And because God has changed our nature. This is a down payment on things to come, so to speak, a down payment that we witness with every step of sanctification in this life.

So here's the big sentence here, right? Here's the thing to walk away with from this point. Our very obedience is a reminder to ourselves, to the church, and to the world of God's character, his purposes, and his sovereignty.

You cannot account for our obedience unless you account for God and his word and his promises. Every time we obey, we are being a witness to the truthfulness of his word, a witness to the fact that Christ will return to judge the earth, to separate the goats from the sheep.

To James' Jewish Christian audience, he's saying this, he's saying, hey, even in the midst of your trials and temptations, you can honor God by obeying him, and this is a reminder to you of his promises.

[26 : 02] He promised to continually sanctify you which you have witnessed. Therefore, you can trust that he is still in control and he will come through on all of his other promises.

promises. You won't be strangers and sojourners forever. James is saying, take heart and know that he is God.

Let us be encouraged by this truth. And in closing, I want to offer just a few applications in light of these truths we have heard this morning. Application number one, cast all of your anxieties and

cares upon the Lord.

We do not need to get defensive when we encounter God through his word, prayer, the church, or our conscience. We know that when he's convicting us or when he's punishing us for our sin here and now, it's for our good.

It's meant to bring us into right relationship with him and to right living. People should be defensive when strangers approach them in a questionable fashion, right?

[27 : 14] You would be wise to get defensive if a stranger is on your porch at 3 a.m. But God approaches us in clear ways for clear purposes, all of which are good, and he is anything but a stranger for us who know him, who've read his word.

We can trust him, and more than this, though, we can cast our cares upon him. Is anyone hurting? Anyone in a rut of sorts? Well, God is our great helper, and he wants you to pray to him for wisdom, for spiritual growth, for knowledge, for peace, and so on.

So cast all your anxieties and cares upon the Lord. Application number two, set your mind on things above with expectation. It is easy for us to get caught up in the temporary afflictions of this world, whether they be small or large.

We say we believe that Jesus will return to make all things new, but in our hearts, all we think about is how to get more comfortable here and now. Well, I really want a bigger house.

I really want more kids. I really want a better job. I really want a softer mattress. And please hear me. None of those things are bad things. In fact, kids are a blessing of the Lord, right? But when you focus on those things and forget about eternal and heavenly realities, those things will disappoint you.

[28 : 44] The mattress, the job, the house, and yes, even your own children will be an unsatisfying God to pursue after with your whole being. But Paul tells us in Colossians 3, 2, set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth.

And Paul also says in Philippians 4, 8, Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

and ultimately, that principle that we just read in Philippians will always steer your mind toward Christ. What is more true, more honorable, more pure, more lovely, more commendable, more excellent, or more worthy of praise than our Lord Jesus?

Think on him, fill your mind with him, fill your heart with him, and see him with your eyes. Let your whole person be committed to serving and exalting his name.

And one important way you should do this is by looking for comfort and hope, not in the things of this world, but in the one to come where Christ will wipe away every tear.

[30 : 07] And application number three, and this one flows out of the last one, application number three is that we are to read God's word daily. And this helps us set our minds on things above.

And notice, I did not say study, but rather read. So to be clear, we all need to do both. They're vital. They're both extremely important. You can't do one well without the other.

But James tells us to not be deceived about who God is and who we are. Scripture needs to be read daily because every page is dripping with evidence, with reminders about who God is and who we are.

It is hard to be deceived if you are constantly filling yourself with the truth of God's word. And you might push back and say, well, I get it. God is good, right?

That's three words. I don't need to read that every day. That's easy to remember. And to that, I would say, yes, you do. It might be easy to remember the statement and it might even be easy to remember a verse to go along with it or to remember that it is the right answer, so to speak.

[31 : 19] But to truly know this, to truly know that God is good, biblically speaking, is to live in accordance with that truth. To be candid with you, it is very difficult to remember this simple truth because the world is screaming with one lie after another and they all essentially boil down to saying God is not good.

And I've seen many Christians, myself included, who've gone through a season neglecting Scripture for which there are many negative consequences. And one of the deadliest ones is that we forget the character and person of God.

We begin to question God and we start to believe a lie. and that's as old as the garden. So fill your mind with the Word of God that you might know Him more fully so you might set your hope on Him

alone who does not change and so that you can learn to trust Him with all your anxieties and doubts because He cares for you.
Let's pray.