

James 1:16-18

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[0 : 00] We're going to be giving thought this morning to verses 16 to 18 of James chapter 1, and I think it would be helpful for you if you have your Bible open at that page.

So, as I kind of draw your attention to a word or to an expression as we go through these verses, you'll be able to just see where that word fits in the bigger picture.

So, I would encourage you to do that. It's always good to do that, but I think it would be particularly helpful this morning. Now, there's one big truth in the verses that we're looking at this morning that I want to put out there from the very start.

It's not complicated, it's not difficult to understand, but it is a big truth, and it is this, God is good always.

People sometimes use that expression, and these verses are verses that would back that up, would demonstrate, or certainly would make that claim concerning God.

[1 : 17] God is good always. Now, with James' help, we're going to explore this truth from different angles, and I do encourage you to actively participate in this exploration.

But if you are distracted, or if I lose you along the way, and I hope that I don't, but if I do, I would urge you to hold on to and take away this big truth.

God is good always. God is good always. Now, before we get into these verses, or before we get our teeth into this big truth, let me just make a couple of preliminary observations on verse 16.

Now, verse 16 really acts as a link between verses 13 to 15 that we were looking at last Sunday morning, and verses 17 and 18 that we'll be focusing on this morning.

And verse 17 kind of bridges these two little sections, and particularly the words that we find in the verse, don't be deceived, my dear brothers.

[2 : 29] And as I say, before we think about this big truth that God is good, I just want to make a couple of preliminary observations on these words, or on this warning, don't be deceived, my dear brothers.

And there's two points that I want to make. The first is simply this. Truth is important. Truth is important. The very fact that James warns his readers, don't be deceived, demonstrates his concern and his conviction that truth is important.

Indeed, there is such a thing as truth. Truth is not possible to be deceived if there is no such thing as truth. The very warning takes us a given that there is such a thing as truth, and that truth is important.

We need to know the truth. We need to hold on to the truth. We need to be on our guard lest we be deceived and led astray from the truth, led astray by error.

And that is easily done in matters of great importance. It's easy, even in a small way, to maybe begin to be led astray.

[3 : 42] And it doesn't seem that important, but before we know it, the consequences can be very grave. Let me just illustrate that with the example, if you can picture in your mind, a transatlantic sailor.

You get these, you know, one man or one woman cross transatlantic attempts. So let's imagine that you have somebody.

Let's imagine it's a woman who is solo-handed sailing across the Atlantic, and she's going to start in Glasgow, and she's heading to, let's say, New York.

And she sets her course. I don't know much about sailing, so you'll forgive me if my terminology probably isn't correct. But she sets her course with her compass or whatever you do with your GPS. And she sets her course to get to New York.

But then inadvertently, she sets it a couple of degrees south to where it should be. Now, again, you don't need to be much of an expert. Two degrees, it's not much.

[4 : 40] You know, if you can imagine this is straight on. Like if it was 45 degrees, you would say, well, that's a disaster. You know, 45 degrees, you know, where is she going to end up? But two degrees, it's nothing, is it? Like it's just, it's insignificant.

But imagine several hundred miles into the journey. Where would that leave her? Well, I don't know the answer to that. But I'm thinking, I don't know, Florida or Nicaragua or maybe even Brazil.

I don't know. Because that tiny divergence as it's amplified over the journey becomes a huge problem. She's in the wrong place. And it's a bit like that with truth and with gospel truth, with biblical truth.

Just that little divergence that seems so insignificant. And before you know it, it has very serious consequences. So that's just this preliminary point and the basis of this warning of James.

Don't be deceived. Don't be led astray, even a little bit, by that which is not true. But there's a second thing I want to say from this warning.

[5 : 41] And it's this, that truth is to be taught, it's to be told tenderly. Notice how James does this. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers.

Now, James is very upset by the fact that some of his brothers are attributing temptation to God. That's what we saw last week. And he thinks this is a really bad error.

You know, he doesn't take that lightly. And yet, in correcting them, he does so tenderly. He doesn't beat them about the head. He doesn't say, you know, you heretics.

You know, it's, you know, you evil people. You know, how could you possibly believe that? He says, don't be deceived, my dear brothers. There is a tenderness, even in his firm warning that he delivers to them.

I think that serves as a really helpful example for us, as we would seek to teach the truth and, indeed, to tell the truth, to do so tenderly.

[6 : 44] Well, those are just really a couple of preliminary observations, though I think important ones, on the basis of verse 16. Now, I said that verse 16 is a linked verse, and specifically these words of warning, don't be deceived.

And the warning looks back to what has been said, and it looks forward to what is about to be said about God. Don't be deceived. God is not bad.

That's what James has been dealing with in the previous verses. You know, there were believers out there who were saying, oh, no, it's God who's tempting me. It's God who's enticing me to evil. And James says, no, you're mistaken.

God is not bad. God is not tempted, and he does not tempt. You're wrong on that one. Don't be deceived. Don't believe that. That is not true.

God is not bad. He's not responsible for temptation. You are. You know, you bite your own bait. If you were here last Sunday morning, you'll know what I'm talking about.

[7 : 46] That evil desire that is within is the bait that we ourselves bite. And so we're responsible, not God. God is not the father of death.

In that previous couple of verses, there's this very somber progression. Evil desire gives birth to sin, and sin gives birth to death. God is not the father of death.

Sin is the father of death. So God is not bad. Be not deceived. Rather, and now we look forward to what James says in what immediately follows, rather God is good.

And this is the truth that we want to explore a little more this morning. And God's goodness is revealed and seen and experienced in the good and perfect gifts that he gives to us, that he showers on all of us, but very especially on his own people.

God's goodness, this reality of his very character, his goodness is seen, it's experienced in his boundless benevolence.

[8 : 56] So how he acts generously reveals to us what he is like in his very essence. He is good. And I want us to consider four aspects of God's goodness as presented by James in these two verses, verses 17 and 18.

And let me just lay out what they are and then look at each of them in turn. First of all, all good gifts come from God. It's one very clear statement that James makes.

All good gifts come from God. The second thing we want to notice is that all good gifts come from the God who is the Father of the heavenly lights, as he is described there in verse 17.

The third thing we're going to notice is that all good gifts come from the God who does not change. So James introduces another reality, another truth concerning God that is relevant to this matter of his goodness, and namely this, that he does not change.

And then the fourth thing we're going to notice is that this God who is good, who gives every good gift, has given one in particular that is splendid and wonderful in its character.

[10 : 13] The greatest gift of all comes from this good and unchanging God. So the first thing, all good gifts come from God.

Notice what it says there at the very beginning of verse 17. Every good and perfect gift is from above. James is not just stating that God gives good gifts.

Well, even I can do that from time to time. Maybe very infrequently, but I don't think it's pride to say, you know, occasionally I can just about manage to give a good gift.

But James isn't saying that. He's not saying that God every so often gives us good gifts. No, he's saying something much bigger than that. He's saying that every good gift has its origin and source in God.

All the beauty and comfort and joy in our lives come from God as free gifts to the undeserving. Every gift, however seemingly trivial or insignificant, a glass of cold water on a scorching day, or perhaps more appropriately for us in Aberdeen, a mug of hot tea on a freezing day, a good night's sleep, a kind word that lifts your spirit, a lesson learned in time of trial, the thrill of seeing a son or daughter or loved one achieving a goal or overcoming a setback.

[11 : 45] All of these good things and so many more. They all have their origin and source in God. Now, of course, we recognize, we acknowledge that ordinarily God delivers His gifts through what we might call intermediary agencies, other people often.

agencies that He sees fit to employ, but it is God that is the source, the ultimate source of every good gift.

And to Him is gratitude due. We also, of course, owe a debt of gratitude to those God uses to provide us with these gifts, but very particularly our gratitude is due to Him.

And we hear in the words of James that he has here in this verse, echoes of what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew chapter 7 and verse 11, listen to what Jesus says.

He's addressing ordinary folks like ourselves. And he says, if you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him?

[13 : 02] And James is saying, yes, that's right. I agree with that. All good gifts, every good gift comes from our Father in heaven. God is in the business of giving good gifts.

That's who He is. And that's what He does. Be grateful for God's good gifts, but be even more profoundly grateful for what the gifts reveal about the giver, that He is a good God always.

That's the first thing that James says, and it's a simple truth, but one that we need to get a real grip on. The second one is this, that all good gifts come from the God who is the Father of the heavenly lights.

So, what we're doing now is simply focusing on the title that James chooses to give to God and its significance in the context of what he is teaching about God.

James chooses to identify or describe our good God in a particular and unique way. It's the only time in the Bible that God is given this particular title, the Father of the heavenly lights.

[14 : 15] And so, the question is, well, what's the significance of this title? And what does this assigned title remind us of as it relates to God's goodness? Well, the title certainly is a reminder of God's good creation.

Remember what is said of God as He admires His completed work of creation there in the first chapter of Genesis. God saw all that He had made, and it was very good.

It ought not to surprise us that it was very good, because the maker of it is a good God. And so, what He makes, what He creates, shares in His character.

It was very good. The goodness of God is revealed in the goodness of His creation. So, the title that James ascribes to God certainly reminds us of that.

And of course, it's particularly a reminder of God's gift of what are spoken of as the heavenly lights. And there, I think that this language, the heavenly lights, is language that is used to describe those lights in the sky that are observable to us.

[15 : 29] So, the sun and the moon and the stars and all their beauty and majesty. These two are gifts of God to us. But I wonder if this title for God might not also be a reminder to us that the God who is the creator of the heavenly lights is Himself a God of light.

And of course, that truth that God is light stands in stark contrast to the darkness of sin and death that James has just been speaking about, that is the end result of evil desire, conceiving sin and sin conceiving death.

And James is saying that's not God's responsibility. God isn't responsible for that, for that darkness. No, God is the Father of the heavenly lights. He is light Himself.

And so, there's this contrast that He is painting, even in the title that He assigns to God. We think of the words of the psalmist in Psalm 27, The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Whom shall I fear? This is the God who is good, the Father of the heavenly lights. So, that's the second thing that we can notice here in terms of what James tells us about God's goodness.

[16 : 51] So, the first one was that all good gifts come from God. And the second one that we've just fleetingly considered is that these good gifts come from the God who is the Father of the heavenly lights.

But there's a third truth that we find in these two verses, and it is this, that all good gifts come from the God who does not change. You see, this is what James immediately says following his description of God as the Father of the heavenly lights.

He then immediately goes on to say, Who does not change like shifting shadows. Now, the expression that James uses here, and if you do compare different translations of this letter from the Greek to the English, you'll find quite a variety of translations for this one expression, who does not change like shifting shadows.

And the reason for a variety of translations is that the language that James uses here is, let's call it, linguistically challenging. And so, it's complicated to know exactly what it is that he's saying.

But the big truth that he is getting across by this expression is simple enough. And it is simply this, God doesn't change.

[18 : 15] As we read in Psalm 90, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God. God doesn't change. And of course, the relevance of that to what James is saying about God being good is simple enough to work out.

If God doesn't change, then God is always good. It's a logical consequence of this reality that God doesn't change.

If he is a good God and he never changes, then he must always be good. Now, it's likely that James is contrasting the variableness of the very lights that God is the Father and Creator of, the sun and the moon and the stars, contrasting those lights with God himself who is unchanging and unchangeable.

The light of the sun moves as the earth rotates around it. Certainly, our perception of it is that it moves. Our experience of its rays is of a sun that moves.

But we know, of course, that it's the earth that rotates around the sun. As darkness falls, we are deprived of its light and warmth.

[19 : 33] Imagine a sunny summer day. Today, that's not that difficult. We have a lovely sunny day. Well, imagine a lovely sunny summer day. And you're trying to catch some rays in the back garden.

And you plant your deck chair. I don't know how many people have got deck chairs. They're so seldom used. But imagine you've got a deck chair. And you plant it in your garden. You get a nice spot. The sun is coming.

This is the spot where I can enjoy the sun shining down. And there you are. You've got your book. And you've got your whatever it is you're drinking. All is good in the world.

Then what happens? As the minutes pass, as the hours pass, the sun's moved. And you've got to move your deck chair. And sooner or later, you need to retreat to the house. Because the sun is gone or the clouds have come.

And there's no more sun for you to enjoy. There's a variableness to the sun. Certainly as we observe and as we experience the sun.

[20 : 34] And James is saying God is not like that. He is ever-present and ever-shining. As one writer reflecting on this has movingly expressed it.

In Christ, we have found the perfect spot to bask in the unchanging grace of God. God does not change.

God is good always. And don't simply acknowledge that as some kind of abstract, God is good. God has ever been good. God is good. God will ever be good. And don't simply acknowledge that as some kind of abstract theological truth, but hold tightly to this truth and discover it to be an anchor for your soul, for your life. But there's a third thing that we want to notice that James says here on this matter of God's goodness, and it is this, that the greatest gift of all comes from this good and unchanging God. The greatest gift of all comes from this good and unchanging God. In verse 18, James goes on and he says this,

He, that is the Father of the heavenly lights, He chose to give us birth through the Word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all He created. Now, one of the challenges in going through the book of James, that's true of other letters in the New Testament, is to carefully establish that the connections that there are between the verses and the flow of what is written.

And there's a couple of dangers in that task. One is to be so concerned to find connections that we kind of invent connections that aren't there, because we think there should be a connection.

[22 : 40] The other danger is to miss the connections that there are. Now, I think here, though it may not be immediately obvious how verse 18 follows from what has proceeded, I think that the logic of it, the connection between it, is simply this, that James is saying, God is good, God is good always, God is the giver of good and perfect gifts, and let me give you one amazing example. There's so many examples I could give you, but let me just mention one amazing example of God's good and perfect gifts, and here it is in verse 18. This God, the giver of good gifts, He chose to give us birth through the Word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all He created. This greatest gift of all, what is it? The gift of life. This birth that James is speaking of is, I think, without doubt, the new birth by which spiritual life is conceived and engendered in the soul of the believer.

He chose to give us birth. James is drawing a deliberate and striking contrast with sin as the father of death, and God as the father of life. You can see that, can't you, how in the previous verses this is the stark reality that James paints, that evil desire gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death. This picture of childbirth and of sin giving birth to death, and now there is this glorious contrast. He says sin gives birth to death, but God gives birth to life. He gives birth to life through the Word of truth. There's a lot packed into a few words in this verse, in this description of this great gift of the new birth. There's a minister by the name of Robert Johnston who was a minister just down the road in Arbroath in the last century, and he's written a helpful commentary on the book of James, and he describes this one verse, verse 18, as a verse that contains the essence of evangelical truth, of gospel truth, and so much could be said of what James says in this one verse. But let me just draw your attention to three features of this greatest gift of all that so eloquently and powerfully reveals the goodness of God. First of all, and it's maybe a very obvious one, but let's just note it.

It's made very clear who the giver of this gift is. It is God who is the giver of this gift. Of course, it had to be, really, given that every good gift comes from God. But notice how this gift has its source in God in two senses. First of all, we're told that God chooses to give this gift. Verse 18, He chose to give us birth. So, this gift begins in the mind and purposes of God. God, unconstrained, unpressured by any external force, decides of His own gracious prerogative. He decides, He chooses, to give us birth, to give us spiritual life. He is the source. But of course, not only does He decide to do so, but He then actually gives the gift, the gift of new birth. It is God and God alone who is the giver of this gift. But James also identifies for us the means by which this gift is given.

Again, notice what He says there in verse 18. He chose to give us birth through, there's that word that would speak of instrumentality, the means employed. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, through the word of a truth. And what is this word of truth? Well, notice how this very same expression is used in a following verse. In verse 21, therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you. This word of truth, this is a word that can save. This word of truth is nothing less and nothing more than the gospel.

Indeed, it is defined explicitly in that way by Paul in Ephesians chapter 1 and verse 13. Listen to what Paul says, and you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth. The same expression, the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. What is the word of truth? Well, the word of truth is the gospel of your salvation. This is the means that God employs to give birth to us, to grant us spiritual life. The good news concerning Jesus, the eternal Son of God who came into the world and lived a life of perfect obedience in our place, who died an atoning death in our place, who was raised victorious from the grave to grant resurrection life to all who trust in him. This is the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation. It is through this word proclaimed and believed as the Holy Spirit persuades the hearer of its truthfulness, of its veracity, that men and women are granted the gift of life, the word of truth. Do you believe the word of truth? Do you believe the gospel concerning

[28 : 34] Jesus Christ? It is through the gospel that God grants to us spiritual life. When we have this picture painted of God giving birth to us and in that way bringing us into his family and we've stressed how it's all of God, we might respond, well, there's nothing I can do. It's all of God.

There's nothing I can do. And yet the means that he uses is the word of truth. And what you can do is you can listen to the word of truth. You can give a serious thought and consideration to this word of truth. And you can come to believe this word of truth, which is the means by which you will enjoy and be granted this spiritual life. But then there's a final thing, and with this we'll close. And that is the purpose of this gift. So, verse 18, let's just remember, is James giving an amazing example of the goodness of God in a particular gift. And we're looking at some of the aspects of this particular gift. And the third one is the purpose of the gift. Well, what does James say?

There in verse 18, he chose to give us birth through the word of truth that that we might be. So, if through speaks of instrumentality, that we speaks of purpose, the intended outcome, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created. And the language that James uses here is language used in the Old Testament to describe how the first fruits of a harvest were dedicated to God.

And it is language that is often used to describe believers as the first fruits. But what does this language say about us? Well, it says and it tells us and it reminds us that we are a people set aside for God. The first fruits were set aside from the harvest. This part is very especially set aside for God, and that is who we are. We have been set aside for God. We are holy people set aside for the service of God. But the first fruits, of course, were also a very precious part of the harvest, the prime part of the harvest, precious to God. Set aside for God, but precious to God. But maybe the most significant truth that this language would point us to is that we are a people who embody by our very existence the promise of God to grant to others the gift of life. You see, the first fruits were the first harvest of a bigger harvest. And if you had first fruits, the implication is clear that there would be further harvest. There was more to come. And what God is saying, what James is saying here is that, yes, God has given us life, yes, God has given us life, but we are the promise of more to come. God is not a God who is yet finished in this task of granting spiritual life, of bringing in His own people into His family.

What a gift. What a giver. What a God. And so we come back to where we began with this big truth.

[32 : 01] concerning God. God is good. Always. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for these verses in the letter of James. We thank You for the truths that He so powerfully expresses concerning who You are and what You are like. And we joyfully acknowledge that what He says is true. It's true that You are a God who is good, that You are the giver of every good and perfect gift, that You are the eternal, a creator of all that there is, the Father of the heavenly lights, that You are yourself a light unapproachable, that You are the God who gives birth to His people through the Word of truth, through the gospel. We thank You that we are among those to whom has been granted this glorious gift of life. And we pray that we would have that sense of being the first fruits, separated for You and precious to You, but also the promise of more to come, that we might be Your instruments in drawing others to hear the Word of truth, and through that Word to also be born again to new life in Yourself. And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.