

# Every Good Gift

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[ 0 : 00 ] You'll find it helpful if you take the Bible out and turn back to the reading that was read, James chapter 1, pages 1011, 1011.

As you turn that up, I want to confirm what Aaron said, that there are no anti-U signs, U-turn signs, in New Zealand. I've been to New Zealand twice last month, and I could find no prevention of U signs.

And I asked an official there why it was, and he said, it would be too confusing to the sheep. And I didn't understand what he meant, so you'll have to explain that to me later.

Well, the games are off. The games began in Sochi, magnificent opening ceremony, started with a bang. And we began James last week, this book written by Jesus' half-brother.

And although there was no Bolshei ballet or dancing bears or highly selective history, we also started with a bang.

[ 1 : 09 ] And we quickly came to the solution, or we quickly came to the conclusion, I should say, that what James is calling us to do here is absolutely impossible, and the reverse of the way we usually think.

Just look at verse 2 for a moment. Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you meet trials of various kinds. Now, I want to say that James is not playing a game with us, and he's not saying these things just to rattle our cages.

He wants us to know the grace of God and how it works. And he writes in this way so that he'll cut through all our familiar deceptions so that what will open up for us is the wisdom of God, the wisdom from above.

And that's what we've called the series in the book of James. Wisdom from above. It comes from a verse in chapter 3. This wisdom, this Christian worldview, and I use worldview not just for what you believe, but the spectacles through which we interact with the world, our perspective on things, the basic orientation and assumptions that we have.

The worldview in James is centered on God, and it comes from who God is, and at the heart of who God is, James says to us over and over and over, is the radioactive grace of God.

[ 2 : 33 ] That's at the heart of this book. I've never preached James before. Of course, I've preached favorite verses from James. I've never preached, and I'm learning a lot.

And here are two things that I'm learning, and I want to say these because I think it's important that we as a congregation come this way. The first thing to say before we get into the passage is we need to come to these passages with open hearts.

Because the usual view of the book of James is it's highly practical. It's full of ethical principles. Now just go do it. What I'm discovering, and I think we are discovering together, is that James is much more about the crazy calculation of grace.

James keeps calling us to do what is absolutely impossible, not based on our sunny disposition or our innate resilience, but based on the grace of God, the giving of God, the ongoing daily and hourly giving of God, who gives us the ability to do what is impossible.

So look down at chapter 1, verse 5 that we looked at last week. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask, and it says literally, the giving God.

[ 3 : 52 ] The giving God who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him. And we saw this last week, didn't it? This turns things upside down. It would be ruinous if you ran your family this way, giving everything that they ask.

It would be ruinous, certainly, if you ran a business that way. But this is the grace of God, and this is the basis of the book, that God does not treat us as our sins deserve.

In fact, he treats us as we do not deserve. And he does it not because of anything in us, or because he's just feeling indulgent one day out of two, but he's done it because in Jesus Christ, he has taken responsibility for our sin and our evil, and now he freely gives us his grace.

He freely gives us wisdom. He freely gives us hope and life. And I think this is one of the reasons why James can be so tough and so tender at the same time.

Because it's only based on the grace of God that we can be completely honest, isn't it? I mean, most of us, and rightly, hide things from each other.

[ 5 : 00 ] But in the face of this radioactive, this wonderful grace of God, what I struggle with, and what I, you know, my own failure, my own foolishness, and my own pride, I'm able to bring it to God, to the giving God, who I know will not only forgive me, will not only promise me future life, but as I walk with him in fellowship today, he will give me wisdom to see through my trials.

So we need to come to this book with open hearts. It's not just ethics. It's talking about a change of heart. And secondly, we need to come with thoughtful minds.

We need to think. And that might be a dreadful thought for some of you, coming to church to think. I hope it's not. I hope you come to church ready to think. Now, it's not always easy, I think, to see the connections between the different parts of James.

This was read for us just a moment ago. And if I give you news from the study, this is irrelevant, but I'll tell you anyway, a number of commentators give up.

And they say, well, it's just a, it's a loose collection of random, lovely sayings. And so when they come to a new sentence, which looks like it's going off on a new idea, that idea, they say, there's abrupt change of subject, a completely new idea.

[ 6 : 21 ] And then they say, it doesn't have anything to do with what's come before. I think we are finding, certainly I'm finding that it's the opposite of that. But James is not like a, you know, a handful of jewels thrown out on a black piece of fabric.

It's a necklace where each stone is placed very carefully, and sparkle when they're seen in their places. Or to change the metaphor, I think the juiciest things come out of James when we think about, why has James put these two things together beside each other?

Why has he done that? So you see, as we come to our passage today, and we head into verses nine to 11, James hasn't completely dropped the idea of Christian worldview and God's grace or seeing through our trials.

In verses nine to 11, he comes to one of the key trials of our lives. How do we deal with money? How God is very much involved, the grace of God is very much engaged in our attitudes to finances.

And you can see right off in verse nine and 10, the crazy calculus of grace again. Let me just, let's just read verse nine and a little bit of 10. Let the lowly brother, and that's speaking about the materially poor brother, let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation and the rich brother or sister in their humiliation.

[ 7 : 49 ] Is that the way we think? I think what's happened in Western wealthy societies in the last 150 years makes this even more pressingly relevant to us.

There's a wonderful book written on this by someone sitting here this morning called Craig Gay. It's always good to preach to a congregation where people have written books on things in the area. Let me give you a little quote from his book on cash values. He says, Money, it seems, especially when placed at the center of our social life, as it is in capitalist society today, tends to foster a particular world view.

It becomes, in effect, a metaphysic. Now, I think that's deeply searching. We think about almost everything in monetary value now, even justice.

And as we put everything through that, we filter out other meanings. And our spiritual ambitions and our preoccupations and our purpose in life gets tied to money. Money over fellowship or friendship or caring for each other.

[ 9 : 00 ] No, no, it's about acquisition and consumption and luxury. But I need to push pause, and I need to say, there is nothing wrong with being wealthy. Oh, and as I'm going through this, poor and wealth, most of us are sitting here saying, well, I'm on the poor side of that equation.

It doesn't matter where you draw the line. Let's draw the line at Aaron's salary. Whether you... Which proves my point.

There's nothing... The Bible's not against wealth per se, so long it was earned in an honest way. But we have turned wealth and riches into a sort of central moral imperative in our day.

So that those who are wealthier are regarded as cleverer, and wiser, and clearer, and smarter, and those who are poorer are regarded as somehow defective. And James turns this completely on its head, and he says, let the poor sister or brother boast in their exultation, and the rich brother or sister boast in their humiliation.

And it's very clear that James is writing to churches where there were poor and rich brothers and sisters belonging to the same churches, sitting next to each other, resenting each other.

[ 10 : 21 ] And the poverty of these churches is more extreme, perhaps, than we see in our culture. And they came... We'll see this in the next few chapters.

Those who are wealthy would come out of their usual circles on Sunday for finding it difficult to be with their brothers and sisters who were so constantly less fortunate. But here's the point. Both poverty and riches offer all kinds of trials and temptations. Those who are poor wish they could trade their trials with those who are rich.

The temptation for the poor is perhaps to compare yourself with a rich believer, to be discontent, to have a chip on your shoulder, to begin to believe what the world says about you, that you are somehow defective.

Temptation for the wealthy may be different. It's to take security in your wealth, to hold yourself aloof from others, to be suspicious in friendships, particularly with those you wouldn't otherwise bump into in the normal course of things.

[ 11 : 28 ] And the grace of God does that. It just flips everything upside down. The grace of God says, if you are poor... Notice there's no middle ground here. If you are poor, if you are a lowly person, if you are financially and materially poor, James says, you should boast in your exaltation.

God has raised you to such a spiritual height that you belong to him. You're now a child of God. He's given to you something no money in the world can buy, a status of being his.

And it doesn't really matter in the end what other people, how they look down on you. And even if you are in genuine hardship and suffering, you are in no way inferior because God's grace has made you his.

Boast in your exaltation, James says. To those who are wealthy, boast in your humiliation. The same act of grace that has raised your brother or sister to God has rescued you from the false heights that we seem to assign to wealth and big bank accounts and many houses.

Give thanks that God's enabled you to see through the charm of riches and through the fawning adulation of others. Boast in the grace of God that swept all that stuff away so that God accepts you not on the basis of your wealth or position but has brought you on the same basis as any other brother and sister.

[ 12 : 54 ] Take your place in the body of Christ and give what you can. It is the crazy calculus of grace. And it's so counter-cultural the way we put things together that James gives five sentences addressing the rich more than the poor because you see we find this so hard to believe don't we as we look at the world.

And what James does is he brings the whole facade of wealth up against sharply up against our mortality. And he says in the face of frailty and physical mortality wealth is ultimately meaningless. And the question at the end of our lives is not how much we had but what we did with it. This is crucial for us brothers and sisters as a church community. We need to have God's wisdom on this. We need to allow the grace of God to change and loosen the grip that money has on us. Those of you in the congregation who consider yourselves poor I encourage you pray for your richer brothers and sisters in the congregation as they face the temptations of wealth.

And when asked about yourself tell others how rich you really are. And those of you who are wealthy and rich in the congregation pray for your poorer brothers and sisters as they face their temptation the temptation of having less.

[ 14 : 22 ] And when asked about yourself say how very poor you really are. because you see in one act of grace God has offered us what is of infinite value.

It's what's eternal verse 12. And I don't think verse 12 would be separated from verse 11. Blessed is the one the man or woman who remains steadfast under trial the trial of money.

For when they've stood the test they will receive the crown of life which God has promised to all who love him. Because the wisdom of God the wisdom from above not only lets us see through

trials to the grace of God but enables us to see through money that our true security and our true approval doesn't come from how much we have.

It comes from the promise that one day we are going to receive the approval that we know we have now in Jesus Christ face to face. We're going to enjoy it experientially face to face and nothing can take that away from us.

See the promise of the crown of life is very important because it just changes all your calculations in life. If we belong to God and if we're living out of his grace the way you deal with your money is going to be almost baffling to non-Christians your friends and family.

[15:41] You may have friends and family who are not yet Christians and they think the sacrifices you make for the church and for Jesus Christ are just crazy ridiculous. How could you give 10% of your income to your local church and then give on top of that to other Christian charities?

Surely you're in danger of missing out. And that last little phrase in verse 12 is very helpful for us isn't it? To those who love him I think that we need to find ways of saying there is a new love in my life.

It's not the love of stuff it's the love of God and I love him because he has promised to hand me the crown of eternal life so ultimately it's not about houses or investments or the travel that I've been doing it's about his grace and how I love him.

And I think at this point the question ought to be rattling around or it certainly rattles around in me why is it that the way God does things is so contrary to the way we put things together?

I mean why doesn't this wisdom from above come more naturally to us? Why is it so easy for me day by day by day to think foolishly? Why is it so easy to think that well to think in the negative way here?

[17:01] In verse 16 James gives us the answer it's because of our almost infinite capacity for self-deception and self-justification. So we move to this fairly quickly but the last two paragraphs what James wants to do is he wants to tell us who we are and who God is and that's why there's such a contrast.

So firstly then who we really are verses 13 down to 15 let me remind you let no one say when they're tempted I am being tempted by God.

God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one but each person when they're tempted is lured and enticed by their own desire desire when it's conceived gives birth to sin and sin when it's fully grown gives birth to death.

In the original the word trial and the word tempt are the same. Still thinking about trials. The focus here is on the inward temptation the enticement to sin.

The reason for that is that every trial we experience every trial that you're going through also holds temptations for us. And the basic human reality is that whenever I meet trials whenever you meet trials our immediate reaction is to blame someone else even to blame God himself.

[18:29] And so what we do is we use the trial as an excuse for sin. I've been under terrible stress lately that justifies my harsh words and my anger.

I've been a very good person all my life that justifies me acting like a teenager now in my 40s. My wife is not as caring as she should be that justifies my affair.

My husband is so distracted that justifies my cutting him down to size verbally. They've let me down that justifies me being you know you know how it goes my the one that I hear more and more is Lord you've just made me like this it justifies my actions.

You see trials by their very nature they sift us don't they? They show us who we really are. We're not neutral and impartial in this.

They don't just come to us and we decide they we are the main actors. I mean if we were neutral on money the last verses would be irrelevant wouldn't they? But though God is sovereign in control of all our circumstances evil has no purchase on him.

[19:35] he's never tempted to do evil to us he's never tempted with evil and he never tempts us with evil and it's utterly perverse to justify sin by saying something like oh this is just the way God made me.

You see in this context temptation to sin doesn't come from Satan doesn't come from the world it arises from our own hearts. Yes yes yes James knows about Satan as we'll come to later.

But even if there was no Satan and even if life was going absolutely smoothly and swimmingly our hearts would still run after disobedience because the moral evil in this world comes from within us

and the moral evil in this world is responsible for by far the most number of our trials. And so James just exposes this little process that's going on in each of us in verses 14 and 15. He says temptations arise from our desires desire conceives and gives birth to sin and sin gives birth to the monster called death.

And I need to push the pause button again and say that the Christian view of desires is unique. That it's unique in all the different world religions. Desire is not in itself wrong.

[ 20 : 50 ] Temptation in itself is not wrong. The aim of Christianity is not to extinguish our desires like Buddhism say. In fact it's to strengthen them but to redirect them to what is truly good and life-giving to God himself.

And don't you find when you see the growing Christian they're not weaker in their desires than before they were Christian. They're stronger in their desires. But here's another curious thing the Bible teaches us about our desires.

They latch on to things that God gives us which are good in themselves like food or family or fun. and then we start to we start to love the thing that God's given us more than God himself.

And in the end we replace God with the good things that he's given us. A friend of mine in his 20s told me a couple of weeks ago that the group of Christian friends he's mixing with are ridiculously committed to food.

Gourmet food gourmet restaurants the finest recipes and their conversation and their ambitions and their hopes are filled with food. This week I heard someone refer to Wind in the Willows.

[ 22 : 05 ] This is a book which has favoured status in our house. It is commended widely and warmly here at St. John's because it has in it the character called Toad.

And Toad is utterly passionately helplessly desperately life-threateningly in love with cars. And near the beginning of the book he gets one but he is a complete danger not just to himself but to other people as well. A real danger to anyone who is unlucky enough to get in his path. The police lock him up to no avail.

The doctors come the lawyers come to no avail. His friends get him and sit on him in his house doesn't work. They take away his car they lock him in his room but Toad escapes.

And I want to read you a little bit from this book and I ask your indulgence it's a longish quote. Can I read this to you? Toad was halfway through his meal he went into a local inn to get breakfast after escaping from the window he was halfway through his meal when an only too familiar sound approaching down the street made him start and fall a trembling all over.

[ 23 : 23 ] The poop poop that's what a car sounds like drew nearer and nearer the car could be heard to turn into the inn yard and came to a stop and Toad had to hold onto the leg of the table to conceal his over mastering emotion.

At last he could stand it no longer he slipped out of the room quietly paid his bill at the bar as soon as he got outside he sorted round quietly to the inn yard. There cannot be any harm he said to himself in my only just looking at it.

The car stood in the middle of the yard quite unattended Toad walked slowly around it inspecting it musing deeply I wonder he said to himself presently I wonder if this sort of car starts easily Next moment hardly knowing how it came about he found he had hold of the handle and was turning it as the familiar sound broke forth the old passion seized on Toad completely mastered him body and soul as if in a dream he found himself somehow seated in the driver's seat as if in a dream he somehow pulled the lever and swung the car round the yard and out through the archway as if in a dream all sense of right and wrong all fear of obvious consequences seemed temporarily suspended he increased his pace and the car devoured the open country he was only conscious that he was towed once more towed at his best and highest towed the terror the traffic queller the lord of the lone trail before whom all must give way or be smitten into nothingness and everlasting night he was fulfilling his instincts living his hour reckless of what might come to him and the next paragraph introduces the chief magistrate early in the service we confessed our sins that we are like sheep running astray we are also like toad and this is going on in us all the time this is who we are we're lured by our own desires and we're lured towards things that are good in themselves desire gives birth to sin and sin gives birth to death and what we need is something to break the cycle we need some intervention we need a new beginning we need a new we need a fresh start in there we need almost a new birth and why is

James telling us who we are he's not doing it to hurt our feelings because he wants to lead us to see who God is and so finally who is God verse 17 this takes us back to the heart of God and I

reckon verse 17 is so good it deserves to be learnt off by heart it says every good gift literally every good giving 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 in other words not just the gift itself but the act of giving by God is good not just some of them he doesn't give bad gifts he doesn't give evil gifts but every gift the way he gives them and what he gives to us is simply perfect perfect in its timing perfect in its substance perfect in matching what we need he knows what we need and when we call on him and ask him for wisdom as any father would he gives he precisely matches our deepest and truest need and in the midst of trial when my heart is wobbly just like toads he gives ultimately what I need most deeply fresh heart wisdom from above to see through my own deception he gives to us the power to remain steadfast he gives to us the pleasure of his own fellowship and in the end he gives us himself the father of lights this is a beautiful way of James to describe

God remember on the first day of creation God said let there be light and there was light and God saw the light and it was good and on a day like today where it's minus something it's a very good thing that the sun is in the sky still but God is not just the source of physical light he's the source of spiritual light and intellectual light there's no variation with God there's no shadow in God there's no shady dealings there's no mixed motives he remains the same yesterday today and forever he doesn't change he's not nice one day and nasty the next like some of us well certainly I am he's constantly giving he's constantly gracious he's constantly glorious he is eternal and he alone is worthy of our love for himself he alone can bear the weight of our sorrows and joys he alone will never disappoint he will never fail us never he will never dissatisfy and I think the proof of this is in the last verse and I finish with this in the one thing that he has done to interrupt that process verse 18 of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruit of his creature this bringing forth is the same birth word used in verse 15 in the other cycle there are two cycles here desire luring giving birth to sin giving birth to death and here is the second cycle the will of God in his own will his own goodness the word of truth giving us new birth giving us life finally as new creatures he gave you and me this life this physical life out of the goodness of his heart and he gives us this new life through the word of truth out of the goodness of his own heart and you know what his purpose is

[ 29 : 20 ] James says his purpose is that we would be the first fruit of his creatures this is an old testament reference to when the harvest started to come in all the best all the stuff that came up first would be taken off and given to God not only is a sign that God had given it and God deserved it all but as a sign that there is more to come that this that we belong to him and the purpose of God's grace is that we should belong to him now in this creation living as the first fruits of the new creation our role in this creation is to show the life of the new creation and I think we do that by living out the wisdom that comes from above by counting our trials as joys by leaning into steadfastness by asking God for the wisdom and grace and trying to see through the facade of our own deceptions and of wealth and sharing our resources and we show the next life by receiving and being thankful for the blessings of this life and longing for the next life and hungering for the word of truth and ultimately loving God above all things it's a great joy to say these things but even better for us now to come to him in prayer so let's kneel and pray