

The Goodness of God

James 1:16-18

Intro

Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (1997–2007), is deeply religious and the most openly devout political leader of Britain since William Gladstone more than 100 years ago. Tony Blair handles questions about religion in a very clever and skillful way. He doesn't back down. His long time press secretary, Alastair Campbell, remembers Blair in 1996 at a school in Scotland where a gunman had killed 16 children and a teacher. In a bloodstained classroom, Campbell asked Blair, "What does your God make of this?" Blair, says Campbell, stopped and replied, "Just because man is bad, it does not mean that God is not good."

(Source: Michael Elliott, "Tony Blair's Leap of Faith," Time magazine (6-9-08), p. 34).

Just because man is bad, it does not mean that God is not good. How true. This is what James addresses here in today's passage. James reminds us that God is never to be blamed for the evil in this world. He is not liable for the sin of people because He is the source of every good gift and, being the "Father of lights," there is no darkness in Him and He cannot commit evil or sin. Let's look at this passage of James 1:16-18.

James 1:16 "Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters."

Basically James is saying: "Don't allow yourself to be led astray. Don't be misled. Don't allow to be taken in by a lie. Stop being deceived!"

This command is sandwiched between two passages and can actually be read as going with one and/or the other. In the previous passage (James 1:13-15), James was warning them not to keep being deceived about the source and consequences of temptation to sin. In the other direction (James 1:17-18, today's passage), the warning is for his readers to beware of ascribing to God any evil motives in His activities for He is the essence of goodness and all He does is for the good of His children.

Ascribe all evil to yourself, to the world, or to Satan; but ascribe all good unto God. "Every good gift and every perfect gift" — every grain of goodness, every trace of excellence that there is in the world, comes from him; but no evil ever comes from him.

James was not a stern and cold-hearted theologian, dispensing a dose of tough medicine and saying, "Call me if you're not better in a few days!" In his letter he addresses his readers as "*dear brothers and sisters*." James had a pastor's heart for these believers who were going through terrible trials. As a pastor, he knew that sound teaching about God and His salvation is the most compassionate way to help people who are struggling through trials. God's truth gives us the rock we need to stand on in times of difficulty and trouble.

James 1:17, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning." (NKJV)

This verse in the New King James Version has the word "gift" twice. In the original language of the New Testament it is actually two different words. The first time that the word "gift" is found in this verse, it is translated from the Greek word "*dosis*," which places more emphasis on the "act of giving," or the "giving of the gift."

The second time the word “gift” is found in this verse, it is translated from the Greek work “*dorema*,” which focuses more on the “thing” that was given, or the actual “gift” itself. The “act of giving” in this verse is described as “good.” And the “gift” itself, the “thing” that is given, is described as “perfect.”

So what is James trying to teach us from this? We can learn two things in particular.

1. Whenever God gives us something, He gives it to us out of His goodness. That means that His reason for giving it is always good; His timing of giving is always good; or the way in which He brings it about is always good.

In other words, everything about His giving of the gift is always good. It’s like the familiar saying we hear at times, “God is good – all the time; and all the time – God is good.”

2. The second thing we learn is that whenever God gives us something, He not only gives it out of His goodness, but He gives it for our good. As Paul said, “*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.*” (Romans 8:28) Everything that God gives, or allows into our lives, He designs it for our good, even though it may not appear to be good to us at the time.

A good example is the story of Joseph in Genesis. Joseph’s older brothers, out of jealousy, sold him into Egypt as a slave. He then ended up in prison for a crime that he didn’t commit. But in all the 13 years of Joseph’s trials “*God was with him, and delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house*” (Acts 7:9-10). God eventually used Joseph’s position in Egypt to save the lives of his family in Canaan (including the brothers that sold him into Egypt) when seven years of famine came upon all the land. Notice closely how God used something that seemed to be “bad” to bring about a great good. Joseph said, “*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives*” (Gen. 50:20).

Basically everything that God allows in our lives, He designs it for our good, even though it may not look to be good to us at the time. No evil comes from God but goodness. He gives hope, unconditional love, healing, wholeness, joy, and so much more. Open your life to your loving heavenly Father and receive the good that comes from His heart. He is freely and joyfully giving to you what you need to bear under the trial or the difficult times.

“Comes down...”

This phrase is in the present tense which indicates that these good things are continually coming down. God is the ultimate Giver. We as saved sinners are the benefactors of amazing grace, for He gives and gives and gives, independent of any merit on our part. This is a humbling truth, that should generate within us a deep sense of gratitude as recipients who are not worthy of such good and perfect gifts. O, the deep, deep love of God! Let His unconditional, boundless love, motivate us as His children to quickly, willingly obey Him. He loves us and He is working out the best in us and for us.

“From the Father of lights...”

This is the only time in Scripture that God is called, “*the Father of lights.*” It refers to the fact that God created light and the stars that give off light. Light stands for that which is good, in contrast to Satan’s evil domain of darkness (Acts 26:18).

God is also the Father of all our spiritual illumination (2 Cor. 4:6). Evil temptations come to lead us into darkness, which is a stark contrast with the essence of the Father, Who is absolute perfect Light.

“With whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.”

Not only is God good in the gifts He gives, but also in who He is. In Him there is no variation or shadow of turning. That is, He’s not moody. He doesn’t have bad days. He’s not generous with me one day, but grouchy the next day. We’re very inconsistent. We go up and down but God doesn’t.

No one would want to pray to a God who is like a chameleon! We would have no desire to talk to a God who is of one mind one day and an entirely different one the next. The unchangeableness of God's purpose, character, and will are the source of one of our greatest motivations to pray.

He can be nothing but good. He’s not over reactive to me according to how I’m doing with Him. He is faithful when I am faithless (2Tim. 2:13). He is good when I am miserable. He doesn’t change. He’s very stable in His nature. That’s why I love the Lord so much. He’s solid as a Rock. He gives nothing but good gifts, for He is a good God. He cares about me and is working for the best in me.

James 1:18, *“He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”*

Here James continues his discussion of the goodness of God as he now relates it with one of the best gifts, the new birth or the regeneration by the Holy Spirit. This gift indeed far "outshines" the lights of heaven that he has just alluded to in verse 17.

In the prior verse James described God as the Father of lights and now he proceeds to explain how God is the Father of believers. Once again in this passage we see the vital importance of the Word of God, the Word of truth in bringing about the new birth.

The Word marked by or characterized by truth is a direct reference to the Gospel. The word of truth is the Gospel. Colossians 1:5 states, *“The faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel.”* The Word and Message that embodies the divine truth of God is in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. As we proclaim the Gospel in the power of the Spirit, God's message births regeneration in the lives of those who hear and receive the truth.

Sin brought death, but God chose not to let us perish in sin. His deliberate will to save us was not forced by anyone or thing. Having willed it, God acted freely to save us. His love to us was unmerited, unbought and unsought. It was entirely voluntary on His part. This should cause us to worship! Who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling. It was not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, before time began! (2 Timothy 1:9). WOW!!

“That we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”

“First fruits” is an Old Testament term used to describe the first portion of a grain harvest or fruit harvest or the first portion of an animal offering from one's herd. The first fruits offering was to be set aside as holy and considered as belonging to God.

When James says “we”, he is probably applying the term to the believers of that time, especially the Jewish believers who were the first harvest of the Gospel of Christ. Those believers were the first of many more to come.

James may also have had in mind those who are regenerated or born again through Christ. In Revelation 14: 4 we read, *“They were purchased from among mankind and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb.”* From this we understand that we as believers in Jesus Christ are God’s firstfruits, the choice of His creation. We were purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ to be offered to God as a living sacrifice. We belong to the Lord because we were purchased by Him.

Conclusion

Since God saves you for His purpose, He will care for you through every trial.

(1) As God's first fruits, He owns you and He is free to use you as He chooses. Since He saved you by bringing you from death to life, you belong to Him, you are not your own. You have been bought with the blood of Christ. Therefore, you must present yourself and everything that you have to God as a thank-offering, to use as He chooses. Have you done that? Do you live that way?

(2) As God's first fruits, you are to bear fruit for Him. Jesus said to His disciples in John 15:16, *“You did not choose me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you.”*

God saved you so that you would bear fruit by bringing others to know Him. If you’re living for yourself, spending all of your time, money, and efforts to make life more comfortable for yourself, then you’re serving yourself, not the Lord. James wants you to realize that if God has imparted new life to you, then you are His first fruits. Especially in trials, and your aim should be to bear fruit for Him and to bring glory to His name.