

Every Good and Perfect Gift
James 1:9-18
January 14, 2024
Rev. Dave Dorst
CenterPoint Church

Read James 1:9-18

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (2 Timothy 3:16)

Introduction

Kent Hughes tells the story of a woman who had become a Christian but was struggling with a bad marriage. She prayed for her marriage to get better, but her husband did not want anything to do with church or with treating her well. After a year of trying to "fix" her marriage, she sought help from a counselor. Unfortunately, this counselor violated his professional ethics as he violated her trust – he took advantage of her fragile state, showering her with compliments and leading her on so that he could have a romantic relationship with her. And she fell for his flattery and attention that her husband did not give her. And soon enough, they had started an affair that lasted for some time, but eventually blew up, leaving her guilty, confused, and angry. She went to Kent Hughes and his wife seething with rage and bitterness. But she was not so much angry at her husband anymore, or at the counselor with whom she'd had the affair, or at herself; she had a different target for who was responsible for her life collapsing: "I asked God to lead me to the right person, and he led me to this man. It is God's fault! He is to blame for what happened!"¹

I've heard people expressing similar thoughts in a less angry, less direct way. They will often pose it as a question: "If God wants me to have a good marriage, why doesn't He help me out a little and get my spouse's attention?" Or "If I'm supposed to tithe and be generous with my money, why doesn't God keep me from being fired and open the door to the job that I really want?" People blame God for not making their lives easier or for not keeping temptations away, saying that if only He would give them an easier path, they could be good, obedient Christians. The Bible reminds us, though, that our hearts are deceitful above all things. And in our Scripture passage today, James gives us a clear picture of who is really at fault when we sin, taking away our excuses.

We're all great at latching onto excuses, aren't we? I've been playing golf on and off for forty years and I think of myself as a much better golfer than I am, because I occasionally hit great shots. When I have a bad round, I assume that it was the course's fault, that I don't have great clubs, that I was a little tired or dehydrated, any number of things to excuse the fact that I've been playing this long and still hit triple bogeys. It's not until I stop clinging to the excuses, stop taking mulligans/extra putts and start keeping a strict score, that I see that my problem is me. I don't have a great swing and I am not patient enough nor do I practice enough to score well. Until I can honestly diagnose and accept that the problem is inside my body and my head, I'm not going to get much better at golf. And the same goes for our spiritual lives. My thesis this morning is this: If we want to embrace God's great blessings for us, we have to stop deceiving ourselves. (Repeat)

The first area that I want to look at is how we are

I. Deceived by Riches (vv. 9-11)

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 39.

⁹ Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

James starts off this section with a counter-intuitive statement about poor people boasting that they are lofty and rich people being excited about being lowly. A key question we need to answer to understand that statement is: who are the rich that he's talking about – believers or unbelievers? James calls the poor people “*the lowly brother*” in verse 9, so we know he's talking about poor Christians. But he doesn't call the rich “brothers,” so is he talking about rich Christians or rich non-Christians? The commentators are split on the question and I haven't made up my mind. I thought the fact that James addresses the rich later in the book would help, but in chapter 2 he'll be instructing rich believers while in chapter 5 he'll be addressing rich unbelievers. If the rich are not Christians, then they will be like the unnamed rich man in Jesus' parable in Luke 16 of Lazarus the beggar, where Lazarus goes to heaven but the rich man who ignored him is condemned for eternity in hell where his riches give no comfort from the torment of the flames. If the rich that James refers to are Christians, then they are still reminded that their riches do not exalt them. There's a “*whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted*” (Matthew 23:12) emphasis here.

James (and Jesus) remind us that no matter how poor off we Christians are in this life, we are actually children of the Sovereign, eternal King, and that our eternal destiny will be the glory and riches of heaven. Jesus said, “*blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*” (Luke 6:20). Now, neither rich nor poor have earned God's love in any way, right? So to boast in your exaltation means to glory in God's merciful act of grace in bestowing salvation on you. And boasting in your humiliation means that you thank God that, though you are a condemned sinner who can't earn anything on your own, He gracefully offers His love through Christ anyways.

If modern America had a word picture for wealth, it would probably be a fortress. A sturdy foundation with great walls and a strong roof that will protect you no matter what comes. You can believe that to your own peril because the word picture that James uses is much different: wealth is the grass and flowers that fade, wither, and pass away. He reminds us that wealth is a façade that easily deceives us into placing our hope in the wrong thing. Now, having money is not necessarily wrong – “it's all about how it has been acquired, how it is used, and what place it holds in the heart of its possessor.”² But riches easily keep us from the primary attitude for entering the kingdom of God: helpless dependence. The rich need to realize that they really are nothing and have nothing that can't be taken away in a moment's notice.

Psalm 49:16-17 – “*Be not afraid when a man becomes rich, when the glory of his house increases. For when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not go down after him.*” David Guzik summarizes it well: “If a man is only rich in this world, when he dies, he leaves his riches. But if a man is rich before God, when he dies, he goes to his riches.”³

The second area we are looking at is how we are

II. Deceived by Desire (vv. 12-15)

¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. ¹³ Let no one say when he is

² J.A. Motyer, *The Message of James* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1985), p. 45.

³ David Guzik, *James & 1&2 Peter: Verse by Verse Commentary* (Ventura, CA: Enduring Word Media, 2009), p. 16.

tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Notice that James does not say, 'Blessed is the man who is never tempted' or 'Blessed is the man who finds temptation easy to conquer.' The blessedness is reserved for those "*who remain steadfast under trial.*" I talked about developing steadfastness last week; verse 12 is connected to those earlier verses, so we won't go over that again. The ultimate reward, James says, is the crown of life, which is eternal life. Most of us probably think of crowns as what sits on the top of the head of a king or queen, but James is more likely referring to the wreath placed on the head of the runner who wins the race. 1 Corinthians 9:25 - "*Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.*" Now, does that mean that you earn salvation by gritting your teeth enduring the worst lot in life? No! But it's a reminder that every trial is worth it, every hardship we endure is momentary in the light of the pleasures of eternity.

These verses distinguish two different meanings of the Greek word *peirazo*: testing and tempting. That is to say that God tests His people, but He does not tempt them. Temptation is not in God's realm: He cannot be tempted with evil, and He does not tempt anyone. But tests are a different thing: God tested Abraham with Isaac's life in Genesis 22 to see if he would be faithful, and Abraham passed as he displayed obedience. Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher, said that "Satan tempts, God tries... the same trial... may be a trial from God's side, and a temptation from Satan's side, just as Job suffered from Satan, and it was a temptation, but he also suffered from God through Satan, and so it was a trial to him."⁴ Satan tempts us hoping we'll fall, God tests us to help us learn to stand.

We would all like to have victory over temptation. But if you want to know who or what is tempting you so that you can shut them up or just avoid them, it's a little more complicated than that. Because James says that your own heart desires sin, being lured by temptation starts inside of your own head and heart. You can try to blame your circumstances, blame your parents, blame other people, blame the devil all you want. Just like Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent. Or ultimately, when you say that God is sovereign over everything, you wonder if it's His fault that you've been led into temptation. In fact, that's where Adam really put the blame: "*The woman whom you gave to be with me*" (Genesis 3:12). Proverbs 19:3 says it bluntly: "*When a man's folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the Lord.*"

But it doesn't matter where the temptations come from, you wouldn't give in to it if you didn't secretly desire it. Yes, there is something external that connects with us, whether that's an image, a suggestion, an illicit opportunity, whatever. But it would not get its hooks in us if we did not already have a desire for it. And that is true whatever the desires may be: for ease, for rest, for fame, for money, for approval, for revenge, for sexual pleasure, for control, whatever it may be; it is the *desire* that eventually conquers the will and leads to the sin. Alex Motyer says it this way: "Were there no Satan, no poverty, no sexual revolution, and no internet there would still be plenty of sin! Our first and worst enemy is ourselves."⁵

Just as holding fast under trials develops steadfastness and progress in our sanctification, so giving into desire and sin develops an addiction to sin that results in death. We train our desires – either

⁴ Guzik, p. 18.

⁵ Motyer, p. 54.

we feed the good desires and thrive, or we feed the evil desires and give them free reign. It is the struggle of Romans 7, wrestling with our old sinful nature - if we are not wary, if we are not careful to flee from sin, and to fix our desires on godly things, we will become used to, and thoroughly immersed in, evil. Martin Luther: "You cannot keep birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair."⁶

How do we do that? By clinging to our faith, praying for God's deliverance, and by refusing to be

III. Deceived About God's Goodness (vv. 16-18)

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

We can win the battle against sin and temptation by fixing our eyes on our great God, by reminding ourselves of some powerful truths about Him that should drive us to our knees in gratefulness:

-First, remember that all the good in this world is from God. What He creates is good and pure. And then His fallen creatures distort and corrupt. We can't resent God with the suspicion that He's trying to harm us or tempt us to ruin our lives; we need to realize that He gives good things, and that He desires to give grace and restoration for His children.

-God is the Father of lights, a reference to His creating all things, that He spoke into the darkness: "*Let there be light.*" It also points to Jesus as the light of the world shining in the darkness, as John 1 puts it.

-God never changes, He is not fickle, He does not have to grow and learn and adapt like creatures do. We can count on Him forever; we know the amazing things He's done in the past and we trust that He will do the same in the future.

-"*He brought us forth by the word of truth*" means that He gave us the spiritual new birth. Ephesians 1:13 says something similar: "*And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.*" It is His will, not our will, that bestows eternal life, bringing us forth as new creations.

-And the last thing that James mentions is that we are firstfruits. The firstfruits are the early part of the crop that the farmer harvests. If the early fruit is good, then you know that the whole crop is good. We believers are firstfruits, we are examples of the salvation work that God is doing. Others will be saved, creation itself will be restored and redeemed in the end. How do we know? Just look what He's done in your life!

Conclusion

I remember my friend, James Murphy, talking about being new to a job. And he said that early in his time there, his boss gave him some advice: "If you want to do well in this organization, you need to learn to deny, counter-accuse, and evade. Especially when you're caught doing something wrong."⁷ James said the advice was probably given tongue-in-cheek, and that neither he nor his boss did those things, but that it pointed to a real truth: that in many places, you have to find a way not to

⁶ Edwald M. Plass, *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986).

⁷ James Murphy's sermon "Wisdom for Temptation," from 6/17/18, found at potomachills.org.

take responsibility for your own errors and mistakes or you're sunk. And that's what we think we have to do with our sin: how can I shift the blame, how can I take the focus off of myself so that I don't look bad and I'm not penalized or held responsible? I can blame people around me, my circumstances, my finite abilities, etc. And the ultimate shield against having to own up to my actions is to blame God Himself, to blame the way He made me, the way He set up the world, the ways He has not done His part in helping me and protecting me.

Paul says in Romans 9: "*who are you, O man, to answer back to God?*" God is sovereign over all things, but He is not the author of sin. And the most freeing thing in the world you can do is say, "It was me. I did it. My desires seized the opportunity to sin and won over in that moment. I'm sorry, I was wrong, I'll take the blame." Every one of us loses the battle with temptation from time to time. We realize that we are not perfect and that we have created some real messes in our lives. It's time to own up to our own failures and sins, and stand before God and say, "I have sinned and fallen short of your righteous requirements." Until you do that, until you stop thinking that you're good enough and aren't as bad as the "really bad people," you will never humble yourself enough to accept God's gift of salvation.

The truth of the gospel is that even though we are filthy in God's sight, even though we run after our own selfish desires that hurt ourselves, hurt others, and offend His holiness, He reaches past all of that to work the miracle of salvation in our hearts. He holds out forgiveness for those who are humble enough to stop clinging to their riches, their accomplishments, and their excuses, admit that they are sinners, and bow before the true Lord. The best news you'll ever hear is that Jesus took on our sins, took the wrath and punishment that we deserve for our sins, and saves us, giving us eternal life. Jesus remained steadfast under every trial, He never let desire entice Him to sin, and He never did anything that earned Him the condemnation of death. Be He willing died in our place. When you are willing to face the truth of your own sinfulness and the fact that you've fully earned your condemnation, then you are ready to receive His grace. And as you live as a new creation in Jesus, He guides you in the paths of godly living, helping you every step of the way to conquer sin, but to find grace and forgiveness when you do fail. Amen.

Benediction

1 Thessalonians 3:12-13 – "*May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.*"