



## **GOD GIVES GOOD GIFTS – James 1:12-18**

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Parenting – what a scary, wonderful, frustrating, joyful, painful, amazing thing it is! Any good, loving parent just wants to do what is best for their children. No parent gets it right all the time and sometimes what we give our children is not in fact what is best for them, but the desire is there, born from the love which attaches us to our children and makes their good the most important thing to us.

Jesus taps into this when he says:

*You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! (Matthew 6:9,10)*

There are certainly times when we don't give our children what they ask for because it is not good for them. We don't give them all the lollies they want! And sometimes we have to give our children what they don't want. We make them take bad tasting medication because we know it will make them better. But everything we do is guided by our love for them.

*So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him. (Matthew 6:11)*

“How much more” – what a wonderful phrase. Our parental giving is limited by our limited knowledge and love, but God has no such limits. His giving makes ours look small and ineffectual in comparison. It is simplistic to say that God Gives Good Gifts but it is a good place to start. As we look at our passage in James today, we will discover a bit more about what this means for us and at the end of the sermon, we'll come back to this statement and add in some detail which I hope will give us new understanding of God's good giving.

### **What God DOESN'T give us: temptation to do wrong**

If you remember from last week, we introduced a word which is translated as “troubles” or “trials” in James 1:2. It includes both the ideas of testing something to determine its genuineness or purity and tempting someone to try to get them to fail. Last week's verses focused on the first possibility and this week, James will change his emphasis and focus on the second meaning and talk about the temptation we face.

It seems that some of the recipients of His letter were beginning to feel that God was behind the temptations they were facing. They were in a hostile environment and their faith in God was under pressure. They were surrounded by sinful practices and were feeling the temptation to give in to the

prevailing culture and do things which they knew were not right. And they wondered if God was actually tempting them to do the wrong thing to see if they would stay true to Him or give in to the temptation of sin. James wants to stop this speculation in its tracks. Not only is it untrue but it is an insult to God, a denigration of His nature. James wants his readers to know that God will never give us temptation to do wrong.

James says that it is illogical to think that God would tempt anyone to do wrong. Firstly, James says that *“God is never tempted to do wrong”*. He is “untemptable”. To do something wrong would violate His very essence. It just isn’t possible. Secondly, it is implied that the act of tempting someone to do wrong would be wrong in itself. I can’t think of any situation in which tempting someone would be a good thing. Therefore, because God can’t be tempted to do something wrong, *“he never tempts anyone else”*. God cannot tempt someone to do wrong without going against His nature as God.

So, if God does not tempt us, what is the source of our temptation? James says that real source of temptation in our own desires. In other places in the Bible, we will see that Satan has a role in our temptations, but here, James looks a little closer to home – at our own hearts. Jesus said, *“From the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander”*. (Matthew 15:19) James explains how this happens. Our own desires “entice us and drag us away”. James is using fishing language here. Just like a fisherman lures the fish with the bait and then captures and reels in the fish with the hook, so our desires lure us into compromising situations and then they capture us and lead us into sin. James almost makes our desires like a force which is actively seeking our downfall. I think that is certain true when you realise that behind our own desires is Satan himself, looking for ways to destroy us. But James doesn’t want to give us an excuse – “the devil made me do it” – he is forcing us to take responsibility for our actions. James then uses the vivid metaphor of birth. Our desires give birth to sinful actions and those sinful actions give birth to death. It is a downward spiral that leads inevitably to our destruction. And the further along the process we go, the harder it is to stop it. Praise God, He can break this downward spiral, but only if we are willing to turn to Him for rescue and allow His intervention.

### **Application: The Lord’s Prayer**

James has painted a strong picture of temptation and how we are ensnared by it. I want to take just a minute to step out of this passage in James and explore how this understanding of temptation informs our understanding of another passage of Scripture – one we recite every Sunday – the Lord’s prayer.

As we look at the Lord’s prayer, we can see that it begins and ends with a declaration of the Kingdom of God - His rule over heaven and earth. It affirms our submission to His rule over our lives. As citizens of this Kingdom, we make three requests which are found in the middle of the prayer.

1. *‘Give us this day our daily bread’*  
By extension, this request covers all that we need to live as His people. God wants us to come to Him, acknowledging our needs, even though He already knows what we need (see verse before the prayer).
2. *‘Forgive us our sins’*  
Sometimes this is interpreted to mean that God will only forgive us “if” we forgive others. Jesus will go on to deal with this issue in the verses after the prayer - that’s another sermon for another day! However, that is not what He is saying here. Earlier in the prayer we have a similar phrase *“on earth as it is in heaven”*. He is saying that “in the same way” that we are willing to forgive others – especially those we love - so much more will God forgive us whom He loves.
3. *“Deliver us from evil”*  
The translation we say each Sunday – *“Save us in the time of trial and deliver us from evil”* – was developed because people rightly felt that the tradition translation *“lead us not into*

*temptation*” sounded like God could tempt us to do wrong. In light of the James passage and others, they didn’t want to give that impression. The translation is not wrong, but I think it misses some things which are there. Firstly, the word trial or temptation is the same one we have been looking at in James, sometimes translated as “troubles”. It means both testing and temptation. Secondly, some scholars think that the first phrase could be translated “don’t let us give in to temptation” which is a similar idea to the words we use. However, maybe a better translation would be something along the lines of “*Don’t start leading us into temptation*”. This is not begging God to stop what He is currently doing but looking at what He might do in the future but with an underlying belief that He won’t, because of His character. This takes us back to what James says – God will never tempt us to do wrong because that is impossible for Him. However, the prayer doesn’t stop there. It goes on to say, in essence “Please don’t just stand by and let us struggle on our own – please “*bring us away or rescue us from the evil one*” and His attempts to destroy us. God we need you to not lead us into temptation, not stand by and let us face temptation on our own, but actively rescue us from temptation and the evil one who is behind it.

As I look at the Lord’s Prayer, I don’t see it as a plea for help from a reluctant God but rather a acknowledgement of our need, a relinquishment of our independence. It is saying: I look to you to provide all that I need in all aspects of my life. I look to you to forgive me when I fail. I look to you to rescue me from Satan’s attempts to use trouble to cause my downfall. It is our declaration of our dependence on Him.

### **What God DOES give us: Whatever is good and perfect**

But now to get back to James! If God does not give us temptation, what does He give? “*Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father*”. Once again, James sets out to prove his assertion based on the logic of who God is.

The recipients of James’ letter would have been surrounded by people who worshiped the sun, moon and stars. They looked up into the heavens and saw the power of the sun to give warmth and light and life. They understood that the tides were related to the phases of the moon. They charted their futures based on the movement of the stars. These became their gods and they worshiped them and gave offerings to them when they sought their help. But James reminds his readers that God made the world and everything in it – even the sun, moon and stars – therefore God is greater than His creation. As great as the heavenly lights are, their light is subject to variation. The sun’s light and warmth can be shut out by the clouds and the moon’s light waxes and wanes. But God, “*He never changes or casts a shifting shadow.*” (v. 17b) God is greater than the most powerful gods worshiped by those around them, and He never changes.

We can trust Him to always care for us and always give us what is good for us. And He is better than the best parent because He knows what is best for us. His gifts are not just good, but they are perfect for us and our situation. He may give different things to different people in different situations and each will be perfect for them.

James finishes up this section with a final demonstration of God’s goodness to us. His greatest gift to us is not food or protection, His greatest gift is new life in Him. Let’s break down the verse (v. 18) phrase by phrase.

- “*He chose*” – Why? He didn’t have to do anything for us, but He chose to act because of His love for us.
- “*to give birth to us*” – What? We are born again with God’s life and into His family. Notice how this echoes the idea that our desires “give birth” to sin.
- “*by the word of truth*” – How? “*The word of truth*” is the Gospel – the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection for us. Peter, in his letter, puts it this way: “*For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*” (1 Peter

1:23) Our new birth is secure for eternity because the God never changes and neither does His Word.

- *“in order that we might be, as it were, firstfruits of His (renewed) creation”* – here we deviate from the New Living Translation. The idea of “firstfruits” comes from the sacrifices which the Israelites gave to God. One of them was a sacrifice of the “firstfruits” of their crops. This sometimes means the best of their produce (which is why the NLT has translated the verse the way it has) but it usually refers to the first of the harvest. When it is used in the New Testament, it has the idea that the “firstfruits” are a foretaste or promise of all that is to come. In this instance it would give the idea that God’s redemption of us is the beginning or the promise of all that God is going to do to redeem all of creation and renew it to be once again what it was before sin defiled and deformed it.

If we go back to the diagram we looked at earlier, we can see that God’s choice gives birth to his saving actions in the Gospel which he applies to our lives which result in our experiencing God’s life. It is an upward spiral into life whereas the other was a downward spiral into death. This is truly a good and perfect gift!

## Conclusion

As a way to review what we’ve discovered today, I’d like to look at our title again – God Gives Good Gifts – and see how we can add to it with what we have learned.

- God *always* gives good gifts.  
God never changes or shifts in His purposes for us.
- God *always* gives *only* good gifts.  
He cannot do anything wrong and so will never do anything but what is good for us.
- God *always* gives *only* good *and* perfect gifts.  
Our idea of good is usually what is easiest or most comfortable for us, but that is not always what is best for us.
- God *always* gives *only* good *and* perfect gifts *to His children*.  
His giving is not based on our worthiness but our standing as His children, recipients of His love.

As we finish up, I want to go back to what Jesus said in Matthew:

*Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. (Matthew 6:7)*

Our God is not a reluctant giver. We don’t need keep asking in order to beg or persuade Him to do something for us. Rather, we keep on asking, seeking and knocking because of our confident trust in His goodness to us. Always, in every situation, we can be sure that He wants us to come to Him, acknowledging our need for Him, and knowing He will give us what is good and perfect. That is why, each Sunday as we say the Lord’s Prayer together, we confess our belief in His sovereignty over His Kingdom and look to him to supply what we need, to forgive us when we fail, and to rescue us from Satan’s attempts to use our troubles and weaknesses to destroy us.

God *always* gives *only* good *and* perfect gifts *to His children!*