

The Epistle of James

Lesson # 5 The Source of Good James 1:17-18 Date: August 24, 2014

I. Introduction

Verse 17 could easily be connected to what precedes it, because it does seem to offer a response to v. 13 where we are told not to say we are tempted by God. Here is one of the reasons why that is true, because, “*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation of shadow of change.*” God’s nature is completely incompatible with sin and He does not cause us to sin. In fact, Habakkuk 1:13a tells us He is too holy to even look on sin.

It is of great importance to James that we understand not only God’s goodness, but that all of His gifts are good, and that is not a sometimes thing because God does not change. His ultimate goals and purposes are always directed at the reason(s) He created anything in the first place – for the full display of His glory.

II. Every Good & Perfect Gift

James 1:17a

There is a glimpse into the character of God in vv. 17-18. “Before we fix our attention on the gift, James wants us to look at the giver & know His nature and His action toward us.”ⁱ God is a giver – full of grace – giving is His nature. Consider that the serpent’s attack in Eden was directed specifically at God’s goodness. See Gen. 3:1-5. IOW, the only reason God won’t allow you to eat of the fruit of this tree is because it’s a good gift & He doesn’t want you to have it because He knows you will then have knowledge He wants to keep for Himself. “You will be like God.”

Spiros Zodhiates, referring to the fall of Eve, says, “James, in verse 17 gives the answer, a most important theological statement that God has created nothing that is evil in itself; all of God’s creation is good and noble; but He has at the same time created certain restrictions as to the use of His good giving. Once you get out of those boundaries of God’s prescribed use, you are likely to harm yourself instead of benefitting from God’s giving.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The fact that God’s gifts are good and perfect implies a benefit, something beneficial to the one who receives the gift. When we realise that God’s greatest gift is salvation through His giving of His Son (JN 3:16), this fact is obvious, but the more subtle gifts we receive [and usually take for granted] are also good and perfect. Sometimes these gifts might even be disguised as trials (Jas. 1:2), but even God’s common grace provides sunshine, family, friends, health, jobs, rain for crops, the church, government, etc. These things are called “common grace” because they are given not only to God’s elect, but also to those who are ultimately under His wrath. God is the great giver – the One who defines giving – cf. Matt. 7:7-11; 6:32.

Keep in mind the fact that God did not just create material things. He also created and sustains laws that regulate both the physical and the spiritual, material and immaterial.ⁱⁱⁱ Imagine a world where gravity works ‘most of the time’, or the sun ‘usually’ comes up in the east. This verse does not say “the best gifts” because God’s gifts are always the best for us – His good is the best – there is no comparison and it cannot be that God has chosen second best and that will have to do. No, He is always acting in our best interests (cf. Rom. 8:28). The giver of gifts is good, and His gifts are always perfect, even if they come as the answer to prayer that we did not entertain as our desired answer.

All of God’s gifts come to us with the intention of accomplishing God’s purpose in our lives^{iv}, and according to James 1:4 & Romans 8:29, that is perfection, to make us more like Christ. The perfection of His gifts needs to be measured not by their appearance, but by what they accomplish inside of us. Can grief, suffering, job loss, financial problems, health issues or fractured relationships be good and perfect gifts for us? Yes, because of what God uses them to produce in us. He never errs in His giving.

“We have spoken of God’s giving, that is good, and of the result, the gift, and its consummation in us, which is perfection. What a debt we owe to God. Everything we touch, or feel, or see, or hear – everything is a gift. We did not make it, we did not on our own generate the means to buy it, and we do not deserve it. So you and I should gratefully say, “Thank You, Lord.”^v

Discussion question: What sort of things cause us to question God’s good gifts and thus His goodness? [see Psalm 88]

III. The Father of Lights

James 1:17b

The title, “Father of Lights”, was an ancient Jewish title for God – a reference to His creatorship especially as that was related to His creation of light – the sun, moon, stars, etc. This phraseology is unique in Scripture, but the OT is replete with references to the greatness of God for His creation of the heavenly lights – cf. Psalm 136:7-9; Jer. 31:35-37^{vi}. In fact, commentators are mostly convinced that the title “Father” is related to God’s creatorship more so than His position in the Trinity.

God is not “mother nature” as so many people mistakenly & I dare say, blasphemously refer to His creation, meaning when they say it - the personal force behind – usually - the weather or some natural catastrophe. We must see past the gifts of a beautiful sunrise, or the vista of the Grand Canyon, the warmth of the sun on a beach, the rhythmic slap of waves on a seashore, a rising harvest moon, the sound of a gentle rain, the visions of glory through the Hubble telescope and the changing of leaves in the Autumn as from the One who is great and whose created order is simply proof of His existence, grace and wisdom, and attention to detail. According to Paul in Romans 1:18-31, what we can see leaves people without excuse when they do not give God full credit and worship for this and instead seek out idols to worship.

One thing observable about these ‘lights’ God has created and sustains throughout history is that they do change at times. Because of cloud cover, the sun, moon &/or stars can be hidden from our sight. Oh, we know they are still there, but we can’t see them. We have times of solar or lunar eclipses which can cause shadows on the moon or on earth from the blockage of the sun’s rays or the moon’s light. With wonderful and majestic mathematical precision, these events prove the movement of celestial bodies within space and time and more subtly, yet still visible to astronomers is the constant, swirling movement of the solar systems and galaxies of the universe – all displaying and verifying the precision with which God created everything that is.

The shadows created by objects blocking the sun’s rays (or any light source) create dark areas. In fact, night itself is created by the blocking of the sun by one side of the earth as it spins on its axis at about 1,200 mph. So we experience daily change – light to dark & then dark to light – and seasonal changes as the earth’s tilt and elliptical orbit around the sun causes a north/ south shift in the focal point of the sun’s heat, causing climate changes about every 3 – 4 months. We are used to these sorts of changes, although a winter like this last one (2013-14) with plunging cold and double the usual snowfall can aggravate us and snow removal budgets are blown apart yet it’s all still under God’s control. We as believers, should be settled in that He is sovereign and nothing escapes His control, even weather, because He Himself does not change.

We can have a calmness as believers because of what James says next... *“with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”* This phrase is one reason I wanted to treat these 2 verses separately from the last lesson (vv. 12-16), because this is an extremely important description of God’s character, and particularly subject to much misunderstanding about what it really means. This concept of God’s unchanging is referred to in Systematic Theology as “The Immutability of God”. It is one of the attributes of God that Ken dealt with in our Sunday School class late last year. At that time, Ken listed a number of verses that state this: James 1:17; Num. 23:19; Ps. 102:36; 103:17; Mal. 3:6; Heb. 6:17-18; 13:18. To this we could add many more: I JN 1:5; Eph. 1:11; Prov. 19:1; Isa. 14:24; 46:9-10, and on and on.

When you think about it, this character trait of God is a key to all the others, because what it says is that all God is: holy, righteous, sovereign, omnipotent, omniscient, loving, gracious, good, true, etc., He is all the time. He could never become unholy, or unrighteous, or start lying, or cease to be all powerful, etc. His immutability is a guarantee or certification that says, “you can trust Me.”

However, going a bit deeper into this, consider with me – what exactly does it mean that God “never changes”? John Feinberg helps us to see this from a theological perspective by first sharing 2 views of this which have problems of practicality. The first is that of Anselm & Aquinas, who say, “God is utterly incapable of any change whatsoever. Theologians holding this view reason that if anything changes, including God, it must change for either better or worse. Since God is already perfect, he could not become more perfect, so any change in God would be for the worse. Since that would mean that he would stop being perfect, there would be no point in such change.

So there is no reason for God to change and plenty of reasons not to change. Hence, he must be absolutely changeless; and if absolutely immutable, he must also be impassable, for change in emotions and being affected by his creatures' thoughts and actions are changes."^{vii}

The weakness of this first view is that it robs God of any emotional attachment to His creation & His people. This is a view that Open Theists find easy to attack because Scripture is full of accounts where God is described as grieving, relenting of harm He had promised (Jonah) or seeming not to have been aware of something that would happen (Gen. 6:6; I Sam. 15:10). The second view is the Open view, which says that God is open, and not locked in to knowing the future, because the future is being developed by the actions of 'free' humans, and if God knew what would happen, because he ordained it to happen, then those human actions are not truly free. He thus interacts with His creation and constantly changes – "The process solution is a God who is constantly changing. He grows in knowledge and perfection, he shares our pains and sorrows, and he is constantly in the process of becoming. Open view defenders reject the idea that God grows in perfection and that his being is in the process of becoming, but otherwise repudiate divine immutability in this strong sense and the divine impassability that goes with it."^{viii}

However, these are not the only 2 options available to us theologically or biblically. Feinberg also shares this 3rd view: "What we need is a more nuanced notion of immutability, one that takes into account the criticisms of process and open view thinkers but still upholds the essential points taught in Scripture and demanded by the conservative tradition."^{ix} While I would disagree with a few of the points that Feinberg makes with this view, because he points to "middle knowledge" (or Molinism – an old RC heresy) as one way God's omniscience works, & he seems to be sympathetic to many viewpoints of open theists, many of his points are helpful, so I will share those best points here. Some of the verses mentioned earlier can be categorized to help us see what aspect of God's immutability they focus on:

- a.) Verses that compare God to His creation or to time itself – Psalm 102:26 (quoted in Heb. 1:11-12); James 1:17; Mal. 3:6; Heb. 13:8
- b.) Verses that teach that a specific character trait of God's does not change: ie) His truthfulness – Num. 23:19; Heb. 6:17-18; accomplishing His purpose – Isa. 46:10; His mercy – Ps. 103:17
- c.) Verses that talk about His unchanging purpose – Prov. 19:21; Ps. 33:11; Eph. 1:11; Isa. 14:24; Heb. 6:17
- d.) Verses regarding His promises – II Cor. 1:20; Gen. 9:1-17; 12:1-3; Deut. 28:1-4; 15-68; Matt. 18: 20; 28:20; JN 14:18; 14:1-3, etc.^x

We can find numerous other verses that support these points, however, there are verses that seem to indicate that God does change, such as: Ex. 32:10-14; Judges 2:18; Ps. 18:26-27; 106:45; Jer. 26:19; Amos 7:3,6; Jonah 3:10; Prov. 11:20; 12:22. Some even speak of His relenting or repenting – I Sam. 15:10-11 but cf. vv 28-29! There are other passages where God threatens judgment, but when people react to His warnings and repent, He forgives. But that is thankfully a change compatible with His ultimate redemptive purposes which serve to save us and glorify Him. What good would it be if He did not change His attitude towards sinners when they repent? If we still remained under His wrath, we could not celebrate that sort of immutability could we? There are other verses that tells us that if certain things had happened, He would

react differently – for example – Isaiah 6: 8-10. God in a sense changed when Christ became a man, when He had pre-existed as a Spirit within the Godhead – cf. Phil. 2:5-11; Heb. 4:14-15; 5:8,9; 10:1-7; and notice the intentionality of this in Heb. 2:17-18.

So how can we understand an unchanging or immutable God, who, though existing outside of time, reacts to changing situations in humans He created? Here are the points that Feinberg makes that I would agree with:

- God does not change in His being, person or attributes. He does not change His purposes. There is no biblical evidence that any of His moral or non-moral attributes ever change.
- At the incarnation of Christ, His divine nature does not change but rather takes on a complete human nature, but this does not convert any of His attributes – His nature remains distinct so that Jesus’ divine nature is exactly the same as it was in His pre-incarnate state.
- God’s will does not change. There are verses that say He ordained certain things B4TFOTW or “before time began”, “before the ages”, (Eph. 1:4; I Pet. 1:20 for example), and in some cases, these have already come to pass without God’s plan or purpose changing, so His decrees stand.
- He does not change in His ethical norms or how His punishments work. As the most powerful being in the universe by far, He determines what is moral and immoral, but His determinations are always guided by His holiness, righteousness, etc. For example, the edict from Heb. 6:18 that “*it is impossible for God to lie*”. His ethical norms reflect who He is and are not subject to change. What about punishments? He has the authority to judge and execute that judgment, but does He ever do so arbitrarily? No. Even when the Mosaic law is fulfilled and superceded by Christ, the punishment doled out to Jesus was the prescription of the OT law – death. The shift from capital punishment in the OT for incest, adultery, Sabbath breaking, homosexuality, bestiality, etc. away from execution is because Christ has come. “Hence, if God in mercy chooses to change the punishment for disobeying an ethical rule, that is within his province, and it in no way changes his ethical rules or his character. The only stipulation is that whatever penalties God ordains must be consistent with both his justice and his love.”^{xi} His punishments are always just – He remains the same.
- God’s administration of His program can & must change. For a big example – salvation. But let’s put a foundation under this idea. According to John Feinberg, “The example I used was a change in administration of God’s plan of salvation. In no way does this change God’s purposes (he still intends to save people), decree) no more or less will be saved than before, and all will be saved by grace through faith on the basis of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice, his person (being and essential attributes), or his ethical rules. As the sovereign God who foreordained all things, he also foreordained a change in the administration of salvation.”^{xii} By this he means – and Romans 3:21-26 confirms – people in OT times were saved by faith in the Christ they did not know specifically by name, but just by trusting that God would provide Him (as Messiah). Although a formal format of law-keeping was set up through the priesthood in Israel, gal. 3:24 tells us that this system was a “*schoolmaster to lead us to Christ*” and Heb. 10:3-10 clearly shows that it was not the blood of bulls and goats that saved. It was faith in God’s

promises of a Messiah who would save by His blood. Read [Heb. 7:11-25](#). The principle stays throughout, as expressed in [Heb. 9:22](#), although the mechanics of it is amended – but the God behind it has never changed His purpose or will per Feinberg’s statement above.

- Relationships: Is it a change for God to forgive a repentant sinner? No. “Does forgiving the sinner change any of God’s moral or non-moral attributes or cause Him to cease being pure Spirit? Of course not. Nor does it change His purposes, decrees or ethics. In fact, in accord with God’s ethical norms and system of moral government He has set up for His universe, God has no choice (if he is to remain consistent with his attributes and purposes and rules for moral governance) but to change from anger to forgiveness when a sinner repents.”^{xiii} [Romans 3:21-26](#) indicates that God protects His righteousness as he forgives sin, and that righteousness is what Christ displays on the Cross.
- One other of Feinberg’s categories to review – what about those times when God appears in some alternate form, such as in the burning bush to Moses, or as a pillar of fire or smoke in the wilderness to Israel at the Exodus? This type of event is not a change in the divine essence, but is merely showing that God can manifest His presence in some physical way when it suits His purpose.
- This one is my thinking about this subject. This has to do with God’s knowledge of the future which is meticulous in detail and impeccable as to what will occur anywhere & at any given time. John Feinberg’s position on this particular subject is more in line with Molinism or Middle Knowledge. I see it this way: God has decreed all that will occur from creation to the final entrance of each and every elect person into the eternal state and on into eternity, in perfect detail. Since all these details will intersect & unfold during history to fulfill His decrees, God is not reacting to surprise developments when He (for example) kills sinners, judges nations, groups or peoples, or brings some to repentance by grace through faith. Since everything is as He planned all along, His reactions are not the result of Him changing His purpose or enacting plan B, but rather presents an opportunity to display some facet of His omni-dimensional glory within the vast theatre of redemptive history. He must react in ways consistent with His character and always does...that’s why we can trust Him.

IV. Of His Own Will

James 1:18

This verse almost seems to be out of context both from what precedes it and what follows, but when we understand it, it is another piece of evidence to demonstrate that God is not responsible for our sin or temptations because the life He gives to those of us who believe in Jesus Christ for salvation is holy, new, eternal and Christlike. Our sin earns death, but His gift (Rom. 6:23) is eternal life in Christ – the only way out of the slavery of sin. So the preceding context fits, and what follows v. 18 is a treatise on how true Christianity reveals itself in a life, so if this verse is talking about “the birth of Christians through the Lord of the gospel^{xiv}”, then the context is intact.

As I often point out, the pronouns always tell us a story and provide huge clues about the context of the passage. Note: “**His** own will”; “**He** brought **us** forth”...“**that we**”...“the firstfruits of **His** creatures.” These are critical to help interpret the verse.

“His” (2 x), and “He” are not capitalized in the ESV, but they refer to God. He is the one performing all the actions in this verse. The “us” and “we” are the Christians – cf. James 1:2, “my brothers” that James wrote this epistle to. So, now knowing the actor & recipients of the actions, what is this verse saying, and why is it saying it here?

Two things are of primary importance in this verse. The first is that “He brought us forth.” This is a synonym for Spiritual rebirth or regeneration. It is talking about giving His people the gift of eternal life – creating spiritual life in those who were dead in sin. Of all the good and perfect gifts that God might deign to give to us, this is by far the greatest. It is the most needed, even though it is usually unwanted (until received) by most who don’t see their need of it, because they are spiritually dead. “The Father of lights, who brought forth the heavenly lights also by His will & His power, through His word of truth, brings forth sinners from spiritual death to new life.”^{xv}

Secondly, God brings us forth by “His own will”. This not a concept found only in James, but Peter, John and Paul also point to salvation coming as a result of God’s will. – I Pet. 1:3 “*He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*”; JN 1:12-13; 3:7-8; Rom. 9:16-18 & I Cor.1:30 – “*By His doing you are in Jesus Christ.*” Barrett comments, “It is not man’s will or man’s cooperation with God’s will that effects this new birth. Rather, it is by God’s own will that He brings us forth.”^{xvi} James’s emphasis is on God’s actions, a concept followed throughout the NT and also the OT.

The result? Once we are given spiritual life (regeneration), the next action is immediate and may even be concurrent. We are given faith as a gift^{xvii} (Eph. 2:8-9) and then exercise that faith willingly to respond with repentance (also a gift^{xviii}) positively to the gospel and God saves us according to His promise. We at that point become a kind of firstfruit of His creatures. In this case, James is likely referring to the times very early in the beginnings of Christianity as those believers in the earliest churches faced the brunt of the deadly persecution by the Jews and others (ie. The Romans up until 70 AD & beyond). Perhaps these are some of the very trials these believers faced, the impetus for James’ letter in the first place.

ⁱ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Behavior of Belief*, Eerdmans, 1959, reprint 1966, p. 77

ⁱⁱ IBID, p. 78

ⁱⁱⁱ IBID, p. 78

^{iv} IBID, p. 79

^v IBID, p. 80

^{vi} See also Job 38:4-15,19-21,31-33; Isaiah 40:22,26, etc.

^{vii} John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him – The Doctrine of God*, Crossway, 2001, p. 264

^{viii} IBID, pp. 164-265

^{ix} IBID, p. 265

^x IBID, p. 270

^{xi} IBID, p. 271

^{xii} IBID, p. 271

^{xiii} IBID, p. 271-272

^{xiv} Douglas Moo, *James*, p. 76

^{xv} Matthew Barrett, *Salvation by Grace – The Case for Effectual Calling & Regeneration*, P & R, 2013, p. 172

^{xvi} IBID, p.172-173

^{xvii} Faith as a gift according to Scripture: Phil. 1:29; Eph. 2:8-9; 6:23-24; Acts 3:16; Gal. 5:22; Col. 1:3-4; Rom. 12:3; II Thess. 1:13; I Pet. 1:21; II Pet. 1:1; I Tim.1:4; Heb. 12:1-2.

^{xviii} Repentance as a gift according to Scripture: Acts 11:18; II Tim. 2:25; Rom. 8:7-8