

Devotional Given at GCI Conference, August 3, 2013

James 1:16-17: *Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers and sisters. 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. (ESV)*

As you know, James wrote this as part of a general pastoral letter to scattered Christian congregations. The overall purpose of the letter was to help Christians live as people who hope and trust in the triune God in the midst of the struggles that come with life in a fallen and broken world. We know from beginning of letter that James assumes that the people he is addressing are facing various trials—all kinds of trials: large or small, crises or daily, long-term struggles. He knows that trials tempt his readers to distrust God or to view God through their fears.

In this passage, James warns his readers against being deceived, or led astray. He wants to keep them from making wrong assumptions that will lead them down a path away from the reality of the triune God that they have come to put their trust in.

What is it that they are in danger of being deceived about? In the immediate context of the passage, James is speaking against blaming God when someone falls into temptation—“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God.’” So, they are not to be deceived or led astray about where the responsibility for behaving sinfully (that is, out of distrust of God) lies. They are not to be deceived about the root cause is of sinful actions. When we are dealing with a trial or struggle, we can be tempted to think that it is this distressing situation that makes us unable to trust God. We think that we would be fine about trusting Him if it weren’t for these circumstances we are in. And then from there, we can make a short move to blaming God for the circumstances themselves. It is really God’s fault—He is the one who tempts me to sin, to stop trusting Him and be curved back on myself.

But the deepest point James is making is—do not be deceived about the character and purposes of the triune God. We are so tempted to draw our conclusions about God from our circumstances, especially our struggles. In trials, we wonder why God lets us go through them: why doesn’t He stop them? Why doesn’t He make everything all right? Why doesn’t He make us successful and free of pain and well liked and appreciated? Trials really do test our faith—like nothing else in life. This is where James begins his letter—describing trials as what tests our trust in the triune God. They bring to the surface what we fear about God or how deep our desire is to remain in control of our lives and not be fully dependent on Him.

This is the issue for James. When we want to view God as being somehow at fault for our failures, we are tempted to think: God has made this trial too hard. So if I stopped trusting Him and turned to my own devices, it was because I couldn’t help it. He put me in this situation and tempted me to sin.

Do we, at least at certain times, think this way? Do we think God throws trials in our path simply to “test our faith” to see if we’ll fail? Do we sometimes feel that God is just as happy to see us fail as to remain faithful? That He simply makes it too hard for us? That He won’t give us what we need to keep trusting Him? Do we feel a need to be justified in our lack of trust?

This is James’s greatest concern in his letter—that his readers not be deceived about the good and wonderful character and purposes of the God they have met in the Lord Jesus Christ. Being deceived about who God is leads us to be double-minded about Him and to seek to receive our lives and identities from Him but also, to look to other sources like wealth, social position, relationships, etc to fill out what we see as lacking or just in case as a backup. And our double-mindedness keeps us from fully receiving from God *because we end up not coming with empty hands*. Rather, our hands are partially if not completely full of things we feel we must hang on to that also give us a sense of security, a sense of identity, purpose and significance.

Again and again in his letter, James points to the truth about the God who is. He doesn’t just tell them not to be deceived, he reminds them of the reality. He knows how easily they forget. So after he warns them, he turns their eyes to gaze upon God.

First, he addresses them as “beloved brothers and sisters” Don’t be deceived about who you are as you deal with various trials. You are not abandoned by God or being tempted by Him. You are those who are beloved by God.

Second, he tells them, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” At first glance, and in this English translation, may look like James just repeating himself. Let’s take a moment to look at some of the words used here:

-“every” from the Greek word that means all or whole, but emphasizes each and every part that makes up the whole.

-“good gift”—first “gift” is actually “act of giving” The Greek word here emphasizes the intention or aim that motivates the giving and the chain reaction of giving and receiving. “Good” here means that which is truly, intrinsically good—whether is obvious on outside or not. So “every good giving” is from above. Why the distinction between the act of giving and the gift itself? Have you ever experienced an act of giving that wasn’t good? We have, haven’t we? That giving was “double-minded.” But God’s giving isn’t like that. God’s giving to us is always good—each and every time.

-“perfect gift”—this time James is indicating the nature of the gift itself and here James uses the word “perfect”, *teleion*, which means complete in all its parts. It is used earlier in the letter to speak of where God is taking us—to be perfect and whole, lacking in nothing. *How* God gives is good, each and every time, and *what* God gives is complete, not lacking or partial—but whole, each and every time.

-“Father of Lights” is a very unusual phrase. Some commentators believe it refers to the one who created the lights of heaven—the sun, moon, and stars. Certainly this title includes this, but I think we can see what James is pointing to by looking at what follows: “with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” The words here are unusual—some of them only found here in the NT. James wants to say something very particular about who God is. First, he tells his readers that in this one who is the “Father of Lights,” there is no variation or change. As Gary often says of the God revealed in Jesus, “what you see is what you get.” God is not double-minded within Himself. He will not change towards us. In the “shadow due to change” phrase, a translation closer to Greek would be “a shadow due to turning.” It is the idea that shadows change due to the sun moving. In other words, they are subject to change by an outside source. But God isn’t like a shadow; He doesn’t change in response to an outside source of light. He *is* the Father of Lights—this is who He is. We can count on it—there is no dark side to God. And this is why only one kind of giving and gift come from Him.

Putting it all together, James tells his readers: don’t be deceived about the heart of our heavenly Father. What comes from Him, over and over, and comes from Him no matter what our trials and circumstances, is truly good and complete. When we are struggling and tempted to view God through our struggles, James reminds us that God, the Father of Lights, is coming into our darkness, giving wholeness to us in midst of our broken lives. He is not divided in Himself about us. He is completely and totally for us.

What is He giving us in the midst of our trials? What has James said in his letter to help us know what these good givings and perfect gifts might include? Well, James has already spoken of wisdom. The generously giving God is ready to give us the gift of wisdom without reproach. James will spend more time on what he calls “the wisdom from above” later in the letter. He is giving us completeness over time, as we trust Him in the midst of our various trials. He gives the crown of life and blessing. In other words, He gives us life, light, glory, Himself—to know, count on, enjoy, live in, every day—no matter our current trials. So we can come to him with completely empty hands to receive fully what He has to offer us today.

Let us remember today that we worship the Father of Lights, with whom there is absolutely no variation or shadow due to turning. He is the source of all good giving and perfect gifts, which He generously gives to us from Himself, coming in from outside of our circumstance and relativizing those circumstances. Let us receive the good giving and perfect gifts that come from Him.