

Where Everything Good Comes From • James 1:16-18

How would you like a gift like this? On February 16, 1994, James Smith of Chilhowie, Virginia, was given a winning ticket from the Virginia Lotto Jackpot worth \$6.4 million.¹

You say to yourself, “Now that is a good gift — a perfect gift!” Maybe so, except the next day James Smith died of a heart attack before he ever got ahold of a single dollar from the winning of that lottery.

Listen to what the Bible says in James 1:16-18:

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

The Bible is explaining that the only really good and perfect gifts that anybody ever gets are from God.

It takes me back to my own childhood as a boy at Christmas time. I learned a lesson about Christmas presents when I was very young. Sometimes the tags on the gifts fell off and I had to guess who they were from. I was fortunate enough to get a lot of gifts from a lot of different people: from grandparents, aunts and uncles, from my brothers because my parents made them give me gifts and from my parents. I soon discovered that the biggest and the best gifts, the truly good stuff, came from my parents. That's because they were the ones who knew me best, knew what I wanted; they were the only ones who could afford to buy what I really wanted; and they loved me enough to spend the money in order for me to get it.

It's somewhat like that in life. The very best gifts, the really good stuff — you can always tell who it comes from. It comes from God because he's the only one who knows us well enough to

know what we need and want and he's the only one rich and loving enough to give us good and perfect gifts.

There are two ways of defining these gifts. We can define them from our own perspective or from God's. If you were asked, “What are the two or three best things you ever got in life?” what would you put on that list? Whatever they are, truth is they came from God because the good things, the perfect things, all come from God. Or, we could define it from God's perspective. The best gifts are not really cars and boats and vacations. The very best gifts that God gives are gifts like life and love, friends and family, sleep and sex, beauty and variety. He gives to us the senses of touch, smell, sight, sound and taste. God gave to us the image of himself that he didn't give to anything else in creation. He made us like him. From God's perspective he gave us the best gifts he has to give.

When you read the summary of God's creation in the opening pages of the Bible, you read that God made us human beings and blessed us. He gave his magnificent human creatures access to everything else in this world to rule over and to thoroughly enjoy. Genesis 1 says, “God saw all that he made and it was very good.”

Not that we humans have always appreciated God's gifts. We have often abused and polluted the creation that he has given to us. We have showed horrible disrespect for his gift of life through the bloodshed of wars, through violent crime, through abortion. We have vandalized his gift of sex

by selfishly stealing its pleasures before marriage, by cheapening its beauty through pornography and by forsaking its purpose in adultery.

We have not always treated God's good and perfect gifts as if they were either good or perfect, but “good” and “perfect” they truly are. So whenever we pause long enough to think about

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what is valuable in our lives, we should be keenly aware that “every good and perfect gift is from above.”

And, the God of every one of these gifts is consistent. James 1:17 describes our generous Giver as “the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” Most lights are not constant or consistent. They blink and they burn out. There are some that are bright and clear on sunny days and on cloudy days you can’t see them. So whether we are talking about artificial light from electricity or the natural light that streams through the window, we know that it can be shut off by an eclipse or by the normal cycles of sunrise and sunset.

It is impossible to navigate life without some fixed consistency. If you go camping you have a compass and you need to know that north is always going to be north. If you’re a pilot flying with instruments you need to know the radio frequency to stay on the right course. Or, if you’re the captain of a ship who is trying to navigate a rocky coast you need a lighthouse that stays on and stays put. And so it is with us as people. We fly to our heights, we deal with our hassles and we need a God who is absolutely consistent. He stays the same. He says the same thing one day that he says the next day. He’s always the same, never blinking with the shadows, never shutting down for repairs.

This consistency of God is very good news. Compare this to the other ways that people choose to navigate their lives. To me one of the strangest of them all is by newspaper horoscopes. They are not consistent. You can read two contradictory interpretations of the same set of stars in two different newspapers. Some larger newspapers actually run different syndicated horoscopes on the same page with completely different information. The absurdity of trying to pilot one’s life by an interpretation of the movement of the stars is not dependable.

It reminds me of the old story of the farmer who had a visitor who had never been on a farm before. The farmer wanted to teach the city visitor how to plow. It was important to plow in a

straight line so he told the newcomer, “The way you do it is to find some point on the horizon and keep driving the tractor toward it.” He came back later to see how it was going and the field looked like it was plowed in zigzags. The farmer discovered that the visitor from the city had fixed his sights on a calf.

Whenever we’re trying to get life straight, whenever we’re trying to put our furrows in a line, we need something, someone, that is consistent. And the only person on whom we can fix our life’s compass is God. God does not change. He does not vary. God is dependable. God is consistent. We would like to think that parents, husbands, pastors, police, mayors and teachers would all be perfectly consistent, but the fact is that God, and God alone, is consistent.

A major defection from this practical truth about God is our modern preoccupation with ourselves. People have increasingly decided that traditional elements of society cannot be trusted. Many have lost confidence in government, schools, companies, science, family and marriage. We have concluded as a society that these institutions are breaking their promises and are no longer dependable. We’ve been told that the only one we can count on is ourselves. In careers we learn, “You’ve got to take care of yourself. Watch out for yourself because nobody else will do it for you.” In counseling we are told to “get in touch with yourself; trust your own feelings.” In crises we are advised to “trust your instincts.”

The result of all this is that we have millions of Americans who have drifted so far off the course that they are hopelessly lost. Our feelings and our instincts and our perception of the way things ought to be changes every day. We’re just not consistent on the inside. We’re not dependable even for ourselves. And so every decision to focus life on oneself is an exercise of self-deception that potentially can end up in self-destruction.

The right and best way to live is to fix your life on God. Seek his counsel. Do it his way even if it doesn’t seem to make sense at the time or if you feel you have a better way. He is the

Father who created the lights of heaven and all of the universe and with him there is no shifting. He is truly dependable. The God of every good and perfect gift is consistent.

On March 5, 1991, a Venezuelan DC-9 took off from Mericaibo and was en route to its destination. The plane wandered off course and flew into a mountain killing forty-five people. The investigators came and examined the wreckage, especially the black box. When they issued their final report they came to the conclusion that the co-pilot had set the Automatic Direction Finders to a commercial radio station playing marimba music. The cockpit door was open and the crew and the passengers were dancing in the aisles as they flew into the mountain to their death.²

We say, “That was really stupid.” What they did was as tragically stupid as one of us tuning off the consistent frequency of God in our lives and tuning on to any other frequency for the direction of our lives.

I’ve been sharing about the great gifts that God gives. It is essential to look at the best gift that God gives. I know it’s not correct grammar but if God gives good and perfect gifts, what’s the “goodest” and the “perfectest” of all of the gifts that God gives? If the very best stuff comes from God, what is the best of the best? The answer according to God is new birth. “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”

God made the decision. We all know that it’s up to the gift-giver to decide what gift to give and who gets it. God recognized that we have all gotten off course. We are all struggling with sin and the problems of life and what we really need is to start over. Therefore he chose to give the gift of new birth through faith in Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection. Those who are born-again are compared to the firstfruits, an agricultural term from ancient days. They believed the first of the harvest to be the best of the harvest so the first produce of the harvest belonged to God.

God wants us to be the best and wants us to belong to him and the way he does that is through new birth.

Some time ago I was walking through a parking lot and I saw a pickup truck that had a bumper sticker on it that said, “I haven’t been born-again. I got it right the first time.” Now I don’t know the person that owned the pickup truck, but I’m sure that he or she didn’t get it right the first time — because no one does. We all get off to a bad start. We’ve all had sin and problems along the way and we all need to be born-again.

The way to be born-again, the Bible explains, is to respond in faith to God’s word. Believe that God is good. Believe that he is the one who gives the best gifts of all. Believe that the very best

gift is new spiritual birth. Then tell God, “I want to be born-again because I believe and accept Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord.”

And if you are already a Christian but have tuned the direction of your life to some frequency other than God, pray now to tune God back in. Renew your commitment to Jesus Christ as the controller of your life and fix your direction on God alone.

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¹ USA Today 2/25/94

² Frequent Flyer, 3/94, page 36.

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