

James 1:17-27

Eighty one million dollars. That's what the Powerball Lottery has listed as its estimated jackpot. Big deal right? You and I have a better chance of being hit by lightning multiple times than we do of hitting the jackpot. And besides, we are content in the blessings we already have from God. "Godliness with contentment is great gain" as St. Paul wrote. But for just a moment I want you to imagine that you have won the Powerball jackpot. What are you going to do? A gift to the Lord? A gift to your retirement account? To a child's college savings, probably a few new toys too. Wouldn't it be ludicrous to sit back and do nothing? Could you imagine someone refusing to donate, invest, or spend that money? In our spiritual accounts you and I have received a priceless sum. You and I have the Father of the heavenly lights bringing amazing grace into our lives. What are you going to do? Could you and I sit idly by and not be filled with excitement and joy? James reminds us today, "**Believers are Doers!**" **1. Grab your gifts firmly and 2. Give your gifts freely.**

James wrote, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." To show us the greatness of our God, James pictures God before us, not by giving a convoluted definition of God, but by describing what God does. God gives. God the Father is a Giver. He is the only Giver and he only gives good gifts. He sends his rain when it's time and he sends lightning when it's time. Every single possession you and I have comes from God. He has clothed the lilies of the field and he clothes you and me too. He feeds the ravens with his almighty power and he gives food to you and me too. All these things "come down from the Father of the heavenly lights". The gifts we have come from heaven, not from our power or strength or paycheck. Ultimately, we see God as the Giver of ability and strength. Without him there would be no job, no muscle, no brainpower. And so, God gives.

God only gives good gifts. And as Christians that's something we are used to confessing. We acknowledge that all the good in our lives comes from God. But what about when bad things happen? Was God asleep at the wheel? No, often we talk about God allowing bad things to happen for our good. But I want to take a moment and give you a radical idea: God gives you only good gifts. He's the good Giver. The loss of a job—a good gift. The car breaks down—a good gift. The sixth back surgery in seven years—a good gift. It's a radical way to think about gifts in our lives. It keeps God at the center, in control of all things, and it takes a perspective adjustment on our part. Kent learned about gifts as he wrestled with his new gazebo. Strong winds threatened to toss it into a nearby river. Suddenly, a blow to the back of Kent's head planted him face-down on his lawn. He lay unconscious for about an hour before awakening to the buzz of mosquitoes in his ears and cold rain slapping his body. Lightning had struck this forty-seven year old father of four. It frayed his clothes and tore his baseball cap apart. Sounds like a freak accident, doesn't it? Or maybe God allowed the bad lightning to strike. St. James, however, has a different take on this event. For James there is no such thing as Lady Luck because with God there are no accidents. God only gives good gifts. He doesn't give us more than we can handle and he tempts no one into sin. He gives us what we need when we need it. He gives only good gifts. For Kent it was a wakeup call to see the blessings he already had in life. He became a powerful witness for Christ's power and purpose. And he had a story to tell! We might need to adjust our vision and see good gifts even in lightning strikes. **Grab your gifts firmly!**

How do I know that God gives only good gifts? We know because God "does not change like shifting shadows." God is not a man that he should lie or change his mind. The same God who loved you and me enough to send his one and only Son into the world is the same God who promises good gifts for you and me. When we consider the greatest gift God has given us, we see how God already adjusts our perspective on gifts. Consider the Lord Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords. Where would you naturally expect such royalty to be born? In a purple padded palace, of course! But the Christ child came in extreme poverty. Perspective adjusted. How would you expect the Lord God walking around in human flesh to appear? You'd expect to be able to recognize the Son of God as someone special and different, not a normal looking guy. But "he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2b). Perspective adjusted. What do you think the Savior of the world would do to rescue all people from their spiritual enemies? You'd like to see a great artillery battle with angels and demons fighting it out and the Son of God leading the tank-charge to victory. But we see a bleeding, dying Christ. We see victory in the midst of death on a cross. Perspective adjusted. And so, God gives.

Let's rejoice in our gifts from God. "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth..." God has given us birth in his Son. Birth means there's new life. Birth means **Believers are Doers!** Through the Word of the gospel he has blessed you and me. Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is forcefully advancing and forceful men lay hold of it!" **Grab your gifts firmly.** Take hold of the Lord who has taken hold of you! He's given us the greatest gift we could ever imagine! An eternity in heaven with the Lord Christ far outweighs anything we could imagine. To know Christ and the power of his resurrection—this is what we want to be doing. **Believers are Doers!**

2. Give your gifts to God

James, the author of this letter, was most likely the brother of Jesus. He was a prominent figure in the New Testament church. You might remember, though, that James wasn't always the firmest follower of the Savior. Scripture tells us that when Jesus was alive, "Even his own brothers did not believe in him" (John 7:5). James had not always seen his brother Jesus as the promised Messiah. But the heavenly Father chose to give James birth into Christ. James had a new life and a new purpose in living. He wanted to show his fellow Jewish Christians what Christian living is all about. James encouraged them, "**Give your gifts freely!**"

It's interesting to note how we are to give gifts and worship to God. James focuses on obedience to God's law as the way to freedom. Normally we don't think about laws as a pathway to freedom. Our sinful flesh sees laws as oppressive and taking away all the fun in life. But to the believer, the law is good news. It's the path God wants you and me to walk. Would you call it oppressive to make a train run on tracks? No that's what the train was meant to do. Would you call it restrictive that a branch can only grow and produce fruit when it's connected to the vine? No, that's what God created the branch to do. This is the freedom we have in Christ, the freedom to live.

By nature no one wants to follow the laws of God. Even once we come to know Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior, our flesh has an uncanny ability to look past the law of God. James wrote, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." God's Word undoubtedly puts the emphasis on hearing the message of God. "Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word about Christ" (Romans 10:17). Jesus often said, "He who has ears let him hear." God wants us to hear his word—but he also wants us to obey that word. **Believers in Christ will be doers!** "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in the mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." Our sinful nature tries to side-step any action or self examination. It doesn't want to look in the mirror at all. C.S. Lewis called Satan's greatest weapon: "*that most useful human characteristic, the horror and neglect of the obvious.*" Lewis captured our sinful tendency to hear and not do. We focus on ourselves, missing the facts known by anyone who ever lived in the same house with us or worked in the same office. We hear what God's Word says, but then, in sin, we forget its application in my life. We don't want to picture others because we love picturing ourselves!

God has laid out what he wants us to do and how we should live in his world. These are our gifts to God. We want our gifts to reflect the hearts in which Christ rules. We want our gifts to shine clean, because Christ has cleansed us from sin. There's no doubt Christ has washed out our hearts. He did it when he gave us birth and implanted his Word in our hearts. Because that Word is in our hearts, there's now no room for another master. Christ is our Master and we give our gifts freely.

So, "real faith becomes evident in real life" (Mark Jeske). James gives us three types of examples to show us how **Believers are Doers!** First we will control our mouths. A mouth that curses, lies, swears falsely, abuses other people, and ruins reputations is a disgrace to God and to the believer. The tongue is like the rudder of a ship. Although a ship might be football fields long, the small rudder still steers the ship. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it can lead us down dangerous paths. "Keep a tight rein on your tongue!" Give your gifts freely to other people by giving your tongue a break. Listen to those around you, and let the Word be your guide—the world needs salt and light!

Second, God wants us looking out for others. "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after widows and orphans." Do you wonder why James singles out widows and orphans? It's because the marginalized are easily forgotten. See the hurting and the neglected. Where are they in your life? Are they next door? Down the block? Sitting right next to you now? Open your eyes and see an opportunity to act. **Believers are Doers!**

The third way James encourages us to express our devotion to God the Father is by "Keeping oneself from being polluted by the world." When we realize Christ has cleansed our hearts from sin, we don't want to fill it up with filth. That would make the world our master and replace Christ. "Get rid of even the slightest hint of filth!" James says. It's time to clean house, because **Believers are Doers!** To follow his commands in our lives and walk humbly with our God is to live in freedom. A branch knit ever more tightly to a vine. A train restored and set back on its tracks. AMEN.

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