

Were you to ask Americans in the 21st century, “What is God like?” you might get as many as 15-20 different answers. Some answers would reflect long-standing religious tradition. Others might reflect a kind of “do-it-yourself” theology. And some other answers might reflect atheism or agnosticism.

Few believers would turn quickly to the book of James for answers to the question of God’s identity and character, because many of God’s people largely think of James as a book of ethics. In fact, for centuries some of Jesus’ followers have thought the epistle comes up short on solid theology, so they have traditionally shied away from it or seen it as an argument in favor of earning our faith instead of receiving it as a gift.

In fact, the Holy Spirit inspired James to write a great deal about the shape of the Christian life as a grateful response to God’s saving grace. And I think the apostle firmly grounds those teachings in good theology. James mostly begins his epistle by offering a partial answer to the question, “What is God like?” Therefore, we should let the Holy Spirit help us focus on James’ answer today. The Holy Spirit may also graciously use this focus to help us listen for God’s inspired Word in the ethics and lifestyle instructions that follow.

In verse 17 James professes, *“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”* An ancient understanding of the universe envisioned heaven not as a realm but as a geographic locale somewhere far above the earth. James’ central point in this statement is: God is the generous source of every good gift. **Every good thing that God’s people now have, once had, or ever will have, has been given to us by God who loves us deeply!**

Jesus’ followers sometimes think of those “good gifts” as material, physical, or relational. We think of positive answers to our prayers for good health, healthy relationships, or material blessings as examples of God’s good gifts to us. But let’s also remember what James professes in verse 17—that God’s generosity is not hampered by his changing nature or character. God does NOT *“change like*

*shifting shadows.*” Jesus’ followers can rely on God to continue to grace us with every good and perfect gift because God won’t change his mind about us or for that matter change his plans and purposes. While it sometimes feels as if nearly everything around us is shifting shadows that are constantly changing, who God is never changes. What God is like never changes. In fact, while our human understanding of God can often change, God does not change. While our understanding of God is sometimes incomplete and, as a result, sometimes changes, God remains utterly steadfast. God’s beloved people can count on God to be, as the writer of Hebrews says, “*the same yesterday and today and forever*” (13:8). *The Message Bible* paraphrases verse 18 in this way, “*There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle.*”

One of the unchanging God’s greatest gifts to us is God’s decision to adopt us as his sons and daughters. According to verse 18, God “*chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*” This is rich and evocative imagery of course echoes some of Scriptures’ most beloved images. When James insists that God chose us, there’s no hint of coercion. God who never changes, graciously chose of God’s own free will to incorporate us into his family. **James professes that God did this through God’s “*word of truth,*” echoing language of Genesis 1 which describes God creating everything that is created by the power of his *word.***

When the apostle speaks of “*giving birth to*” those whom God chose, we Christians may hear echoes of Jesus’ stirring words that so mystified Nicodemus when he said to Israel’s curious Pharisee, “*No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again*” (John 3:3). These words still puzzle and sometimes divide Jesus’ followers, but we sense that James is trying to describe the new life to which God “gives birth” deep within us.

The apostle rejoices in how God’s good gift of choosing us makes us a “*kind of firstfruits.*” James’ agricultural imagery of course resonates with other Scripture passages. Firstfruits were the first and best parts of the harvest that the Israelite people offered in gratitude for God’s sustaining gifts. As “*firstfruits,*” we adopted sons and daughters of God are considered the

“crown” of all God’s creatures. God creates human beings at the end of his creation chronologically, but we are really God’s crowning achievement.

As a result, God expects his “crowning glory” to respond to his amazing grace in appropriate ways. God expects us to “*produce the righteousness that God desires*” as verse 20 states. The Greek literally refers to this righteousness as the “*righteousness of God,*” suggesting that the Holy Spirit gives to Christians a life that imitates God’s righteousness. Wow!

This same righteousness speaks directly to some of the 21st century’s deepest problems and needs. In a way it is both a gift to God’s people and to the times in which we live. The letter of James describes the most meaningful and purposeful life we can live. What’s more, in a culture that doesn’t like to listen to anyone for more than a split second, James asks Christians to be “*quick to listen.*” In a culture with knee-jerk tongues and tempers, the apostle invites us to be “*slow to speak and slow to become angry*” (v. 19).

God’s righteousness is, in other words, the very opposite of our culture’s self-righteousness! Did you hear that? **God is quick to listen to his people and slow to make an angry response, so James invites us to be much quicker to listen than to speak or to lose our temper.** *The Message* paraphrases this teaching so beautifully and poetically: “*Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear.*” Basically, James is reminding us not to just hear God’s saving Word, but to act on it. “*Do what*” God’s Word says, James insists in verse 22. “*Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.*” This gift does not automatically materialize in our lives but has potential to give the most meaningful kind of life we could ever live—at least this side of heaven.

Let me also say that verse 21 is a *key verse* in this passage from James. It says, “*Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.*” Sounds a bit like James stops preaching and starts meddling! But he may be saying something as

simple as because “*every good and perfect gift*” comes from God, accept those wonderful gifts by living a good life. When James says to “*humbly accept the word planted in you,*” he uses it in the sense of a seed planted in the ground. Jesus’ Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13 and Luke 8) tells us how the seed of the word is sown in the hearts of people. God sows his truth in the hearts of men and women and those who are wise will receive it and welcome it. **What William Barclay says this verse is telling us is that we all need a “teachable spirit.”** That is how we *humbly accept* the word planted in us: “without resentment, without anger, able to face the truth, even when it hurts. A teachable spirit is not blinded by its own prejudices. A teachable spirit is not seduced by laziness” (*The Letters of James & Peter*).

What further shape does a God honoring life take? It carefully controls its tongue by keeping “*a tight rein on their tongues.*” Everyone whom God makes righteous and blessed are those who very carefully watch what we say. We also keep a close eye on “*orphans and widows in their distress*” and keep ourselves “*from being polluted by the world*” (v. 27). We appropriately respond to God’s grace by staying close to those who are hurting and away from all that would draw us from God’s Word. Jesus’ followers, in other words, let the Spirit keep us close to God and God’s purposes and away from the evil one, his allies and his destructive ways.

In his book, *The Fruit of the Spirit*, Stephen Winward observes, “How we relate to and get on with others is the supreme test of Christian character. Progress in holiness can best be measured not by the length of time we spend in prayer, not by the number of times we go to church, not by the amount of money we contribute to God’s work, not by the range and depth of our knowledge of the Bible, but rather by the quality of our relationships...This is the most searching test of Christlikeness.” **What is God like? God is good!**

So, if we should ever wonder, “Where Do Good and Perfect Gifts Come From?” James provides an answer: “*from above...from the Father of the heavenly lights.*” That’s where. Amen.