**FGBC: The gifts God gives**

James 1:16-17

December 29, 2019

Dan Hoffman

Good morning. Welcome to the end of 2019. Today we are going to be in the book of James, so please go ahead and grab your Bible.

I don’t know about you, but I love the Christmas season. I like the lights. I like all the family time. I like the opportunity to ingest copious amounts of turkey and ham. And, after the fact, I love getting back to life as usual.

And we are almost there. Today is an “in-between Sunday”. We are in between Christmas and New Years. We are in between our Advent series and a return to Revelation which we will get to next week. So this is the one Sunday of the year where on Tuesday morning when I arrive at the office I don’t have a text picked out for me.

I outline all my sermons a year in advance which means I have the text and title picked for me every week when I show up at church, all with the exception of this week.

And so as I was thinking about what to focus on today I thought that, in preparation for heading into all the unknowns of 2020 it would be great to look at the immutability, or unchanging, nature of God in comparison to the shifting shadows of life we live in.

…

So the world we live in everything changes. How many of you can remember how much you paid for your first car? Now imagine you bought a car today that cost the same as that first car. How much of a beater would it be?

Or think of all the other great things of decades past that are no more. Cassette tapes. Riding in cars with no seat belts. Making collect calls from a phone booth. Biking without a helmet. Waterbeds – the 80’s were great! And chicken pox parties. Those were the good old days, but everything changes.

…

Now as Jesus followers we are people of both and. So there are some aspects of our lives were godliness requires change. For example godly people strive to be constantly growing in Christ-likeness. The reality, however, is that stagnation is the norm. And so godly people are those who keep recognizing that they have slipped into standing still, and repent and turn over new leaves to try again.

I’m not a big fan of New Years resolutions because of how few of them get kept – it’s kind of a joke. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t make resolutions; it means we need to make them more than once a year.

So don’t wait for January 1st to take an inventory of your life and see whether there are aspects of your faith journey that have cooled and need to be rekindled. Jesus followers know they default to lethargy and so regularly take inventory of themselves and strive to change, to grow.

…

Similarly godly people view themselves as missionaries. Missionaries are people who find creative ways to speak the language of the locals in order to make the message of Christ relevant. But it isn’t just missionaries on the other side of the world who do this, we are all called to this.

The reality, however, is that creativity is difficult. It takes intentionality to think of how to present Christ to someone in a way that will connect with them. And so what happens by default is we try once and then settle into life as a nice person hoping that one day these people we love will come to Christ on their own. Is it just me?

That’s the norm, but godly people recognize from time to time that this is what has happened, and repent and try again to learn the language of those around them in order to draw them to Christ.

So if you are a university student surrounded by intellectuals you are going to want to study apologetics and find ways to give an intellectual defence for your faith. On the other hand if you are retired and your primary interaction is with family members who aren’t university students then you might want to avoid starting conversations by saying “Hey, my metanarrative has been significantly influenced by anti-dispensational eschatology. How about yours?”

That’s probably the wrong language to spark a hunger for Christ with the people eating leftover Christmas baking at your counter. Instead you are going to want to tell stories of God at work in your life. But either way godly people seek to learn the language of the people beside them in order to draw them to Christ. Paul says:

Even though I am a free man with no master, I have become a slave to all people to bring many to Christ. When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew….When I am with the Gentiles who do not follow the Jewish law, I too live apart from that law so I can bring them to Christ. But I do not ignore the law of God; I obey the law of Christ.

When I am with those who are weak, I share their weakness, for I want to bring the weak to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

So Jesus followers are constantly changing our tactics as we seek to make Christ relevant to the people we find ourselves surrounded by. That’s true for individuals, and it’s true for churches. Jesus followers who don’t change aren’t Jesus followers.

…

But we are a both and people – we change but not everything changes – because in the midst of all the shifting shadows God never changes. And this is an incredible blessing for us in an age of uncertainty.

So look with me at James chapter 1 verse 16.

[Read James 1:16-17]

James says the Father of heavenly lights doesn’t change; He’s immutable. This is one of the aspects that makes God holy. He’s different from us.[[1]](#footnote-1)

You see we are constantly changing just like everything around us. If you’ve lived in PG long you know it has changed. I mean do remember life here prior to the university?

I remember being about 10 years old and traveling to Kelowna with my parents. And they had a man living in their basement suite who was black. And I don’t think I had ever seen a black man before, and I couldn’t get my eyes off him. That’s because I grew up in PG in the 80’s.

In my early 20’s I lived in Vancouver and I remember seeing people running on the side of the road. And they weren’t running away from anything, they were just running – I’d never seen that before. Being active in PG meant getting out of your car to buy your donut instead of going through the drive through. But all of this has changed in the last 20 years or so.

But do you know what hasn’t changed? God. He is exactly the same today as He was 20 years ago and 2000 years ago and ten million years ago. And here’s why. God can’t grow. He can’t mature. You see God has never looked back on his early years and said “Boy, I was sure a clown back then.” God’s never done that, but I sure have. Nikki and I are about to turn 40 and someone said to us “40 is the new 20” and we both looked at each other and said “I would not be 20 again!

I’m so glad that is over. I’m so glad I’ve put some of that immaturity behind me – some of it, not all of it. But God’s never put anything about Himself behind Him. That’s what perfection means. There is no space for improvement or growth.

This means God isn’t planning any New Years resolutions for 2020, and He didn’t make any last year either. There isn’t an aspect of Him that can improve. He’s perfect.

Did you know that God has no parts? He’s just God. He’s spirit. But this isn’t the same as us. We are made up of parts. And parts break down. So right now I’m nursing a sore knee and some elbow pain that won’t go away. That didn’t used to happen to me 20 years ago. But it’s reality today.

I remember when I could eat a Big Mac right before bed and then sleep like a baby. My parts don’t work like they used to. I used to sleep through the night every night – that was too bad – now I have more excuses for taking naps. But do you know who doesn’t sleep or slumber? God. God never pushes through a big task and then takes a minute to lie down. He’s perfect. He’s immutable. And because this is who God is we can have confidence to live in the midst of the shifting shadows.

…

And God doesn’t just not change, He’s good. He is the Father of heavenly lights. And light has always been part of His character. We get hints of this throughout scripture. So in the beginning:

God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness. (Genesis 1:3-4)

Here’s the interesting thing about this: it’s a few verses later that the sun and moon get created. So in verse 3 we have light illuminating the universe, coming from God. God and light have always been tied together.

So think of God showing up to Moses in the light of the burning bush. Or think of the plagues in Egypt, one of which was darkness – God removing His presence. One of the key implements in the temple was the Menorah – a seven-pronged lampstand with a perpetual flame imaging the perpetual presence of God.

And then Jesus shows up and Matthew says “A people walking in darkness have seen a great light.” And John says “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” And Jesus says

“I am the light of the world. If you follow Me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.” (John 8:12)

Throughout scripture light is intimately connected with the presence and power of God. And I love how it all ends with a return to the beginning. In Revelation 21 John writes:

I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light. The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the world will enter the city in all their glory. Its gates will never be closed at the end of day because there is no night there. (Revelation 21:22-25)

…

In the end everything is going to be made new such that there will be no more sickness or disease or death. There won’t be any temptation or difficulty. Satan won’t be there anymore. All of this will be forgotten. And there won’t be a need for the sun or moon because the Father of lights will be perfectly present.

…

That’s what it will be like then, but today we live in the already but not yet. If you are a Jesus follower here you’ve tasted some of God’s goodness over the years. You’ve seen His faithfulness to call you out of brokenness into light. Many of us have experienced healing and blessing. But at the same time it’s not all here yet, is it? Our bodies are still changing, and not for the better. Our relationships change and often not for the better. I just learned that one of my high school friends, one of the first weddings I officiated, just got separated. We live in the already but not yet.

…

But look back at James 1:17. Within the context of the already but not yet James tells us something else about the Father of Lights who doesn’t change. He says “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights.”

Now out of the gate I think we need to do some work on this part of the verse because we have been trained to think of good and perfect gifts in a certain way. It’s a good gift when you are struggling financially and then something changes. God comes through and you step out of having slightly less than you need every month and you are able to pay your bills. That’s a blessing.

It’s a good gift when you’ve got cancer and then you try some new experimental treatment and all of a sudden instead of weeks or months you are looking at the prospect of years or maybe decades. That’s a blessing.

It’s a good gift when a strained relationship with a family member suddenly alleviates and you are able to sit at the same table over Christmas dinner and not be awkward.

These things are nice, but they aren’t the good and perfect gifts that scripture leads us to. Instead the Bible is clear that the best gift, the best thing that you or I could receive is being brought into a right relationship with God through Christ. That’s a blessing.

So if you aren’t a Jesus follower today the very best thing that could happen to you in 2020 is not no debt or good health or a great marriage. The best thing that could happen to you would be having your sins forgiven and transitioning from walking in darkness to walking in the light. This is the path to abundant life and joy you were created for. It’s the best thing you could experience both now and forever.

If you are a Jesus follower, the very best thing that can happen to you in 2020 is not getting out of debt or having good health or restored relationships. The best gift you could receive is being made more aware of your continual need for Christ such that you press in to Him and grow in His likeness. The Bible says those are the good and perfect gifts we need to long for and seek at any cost.

And if this is true, then everything we experience in life that moves us in this direction – being reconciled with God and growing in Christ-likeness – is the thing we need more of; it is what we need most, more than life itself.

…

And it’s into this context that James tells us God is going to bless you with every good and perfect gift. Every blessing you are going to bask in this next year is going to come from Him.

Now some of those blessings are going to alleviate suffering and pain. In 2020 some of us, not all but some, are going to experience fear being driven out of you and replaced with a peace of Christ that surpasses all understanding.

And some of us who have been struggling to pray – who have felt like every word we utter to God hits the ceiling and bounces back – some of us are going to experience a breakthrough where worship and prayer is going to flow freely. All of a sudden reading the word isn’t going to be stale and boring, it is going to come alive.

And some of us are going to fall in love with Jesus this year and actually become Christians. Some of us have been attending church and giving money to charity and ticking the “I’m a Christian” box on the census for years while never actually living for Jesus’ glory. But for some of us that is going to change in 2020.

All of a sudden the lights are going to go on and you are going to be swept away by the fact that the God of the universe became a man because He was thinking about you, and wanted to save you from the sin that holds you in bondage and keeps you from abundant life. And all of a sudden that’s going to make sense and you are going to fall in love with Jesus. Some of us are going to actually become Christians in 2020.

And some of us are going to be healed from sickness and get promotions and fix broken relationships and it’s going to be great – it’s going to be a blessing.

But for others of us 2020 is going to be a very different year. And maybe you have a sense of this already. Maybe 2019 has been really hard and it looks like 2020 is going to be the same.

Please hear this, it’s not popular, but it’s important for us to know that sometimes the best gift – the most perfect gift – God could give is allowing difficulty, loss, and suffering to invade our experience.

Now I’m not saying we are going to understand this in the moment. Everyone hates pain – we’re the Tylenol generation. And so it is a foreign concept to think of pain as a purifier, but experientially we know this is true. Don’t look at the suffering you are in right now but look way back. Aren’t you stronger and wiser because of some of the stuff you’ve walked through?

…

A few verses earlier in James he writes:

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing. (James 1:2-4)

This is the context for verse 17. Every good and perfect gift comes from the Father of lights. James is saying sometimes the perfect gift is difficulty. Now nobody ever wants difficulty, but God knows what we need.

And so what this means is that in 2020 some of us are going to be set free from our addictions, and others of us are going to struggle with them. Some of us are going to be healed of sickness and others of us are going to succumb to it. Some of us are going to get out of debt and others of us will be pinched even more. But in all of this God isn’t being mean, He’s good. He never wields a club. He takes no joy in our pain. He never abuses, but He does cut. Like a surgeon He knows that sometimes the perfect gift for His children is difficulty. And every experience that ultimately leads to our abundant life comes from God.

…

So we are on the cusp of 2020. There is a full year of unknowns laying out before us, and there are some consistencies. The Father of heavenly lights isn’t going to change. He is the same yesterday today and forever. And that’s good news for those who live in the shifting shadows. And so we can trust that in the in-between He will give every good and perfect gift to His children. That’s what He has for you this next year.

So let Him bless you. Throw yourself in His arms and let the unchanging one change you. And don’t wait for 2020, let Him grow your faith and endurance towards perfection today.

1. Sermon outline adapted from Matt Chandler <https://www.tvcresources.net/resource-library/sermons/he-never-changes> (Accessed December 23, 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)