

Julie Merritt Lee
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Providence Baptist Church
Hendersonville, North Carolina

“People of the Gift”
James 1:17

So begins our four week series on James 1 and beginning a season of prayer and reflection—listening to God to discern who we are as a church, our core identity.

James is the perfect book to help us in this process because it is a book of moral exhortations. In fact of the 108 verses, there are 59 imperatives. And ultimately James’ message is to persuade us to live up to the commitments we have made. How perfect. And chapter one, where we’ll be looking at serves as a summary of the entire book.

I’d like to say from the get-go that knowing who we are as a church is not some mysterious endeavor. I’ve heard people discuss how they have tried so hard to hear God’s will for their lives or church and how frustrating it is for them. Well, the good news is Jesus has already outlined through Holy Scriptures how we are to live and who we are to be one to another in his church. We are to *be* and *share* the **good news**. Perhaps this series in some ways will be more of a reminder of who we are called to be as the bride of Christ.

But of course, we are asking that *other* question in this time of discernment: what makes this church unique—this is part of what we are trying to name and figure out.

We start by identifying who we *are* and not by who we’re *not*. We start getting into trouble when we say, “Well, we’re not *that* kind of church or we don’t believe *that*.” But let us figure out what we do stand for.

Today’s word from James gives us a good start:

“Every good and perfect gift is from above.”

We are called to see all the gifts around us, and see them as from God. The opposite way of living is to grasp, trying to possess and be led by our desires, not legitimate wants but disordered passions. When we possess, when we clutch, when we hoard, we’re in trouble. And these are not just material possessions. We can hoard relationships, ideas, expectations, plans.

When my parents were here a week ago I had a tight agenda set for them—so many things to see, you know. When I would join them in the afternoon, I was pushing to get everything done on the agenda. In the late evening, I felt something inside of me. I was anxious, dissatisfied. I had been clutching on to an ideal, something seemingly good—to help them have a good time and to do everything on the list. But this focus had possessed me. It was in control of me and not the other way around. I wasn’t even enjoying the experiences. Ultimately, what I learned from it was I wasn’t taking in each spontaneous conversation and place as a gift.

Why do we have a tendency to tighten our hands instead of open them? Scarcity. We have been conditioned to believe that there's never going to be enough time, never enough food, never enough money, never enough love. We better get while the getting's good.

Childhood has taught us this. They tried to teach us to share, but we weren't very good at it. Remember having to share a cookie or being asked to split a slice of cake. First of all, we didn't want to do it, but secondly, if one side was bigger, we wanted the bigger side, even though out of guilt we may have given the bigger side to our friend. We couldn't stop thinking in those five seconds, "I'm still going to be hungry. I'm still going to want more. If I give half away I won't be satisfied." Somewhere along the way, we began to believe that we were owed/deserved a full slice of cake, a better car, a better house, a better paycheck, a better church?

Shoot, our culture says we have inalienable rights. And I may really be stepping on some toes here when I say—we don't. We have been taught that we have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But what does the way of Christ teach us? Jesus, who is God, didn't even consider his life to be his own to possess, but willingly gave it up for us.

For we get indoctrinated by our culture to think we have these rights. But the truth is if you confess Jesus Christ as Lord, your allegiance is to Christ first before state. And Christ tells us what rights we have: to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed." Or as James says visit the orphans and widows, hear the cries of the oppressed, raise up the sick, listen to the prayers made in faith, and forgive the sins of those who confess them.¹ These are the rights that we have, which obviously aren't really personal rights but **communal imperatives**.

And what about the church? Do you think possession shows up at church? Heck yah. We begin to think it's our church because we give our money. We've invested our time, money, and talents. That's why so many church folks get upset and split over carpet color because they've believe in the one big lie—it's *our* church. We forget the fundamental guidance principle: this is **God's** church—"for every good and perfect gift is from above." Nothing is truly ours.

And believe it or not, even something as close to us as our children are not even ours. We may think because we gave birth to them that they're ours, but they're not. They're a gift, given for a time. At baby dedications at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, pastor George Mason does something very important. He holds the baby and walks him/her around the church and its members. As he rounds the last pew, heading back to the parents, he says to them, "this child is not your own. He or she is a gift, a gift from God. They are just in your care for a little while." Gifts can be fragile can't they, but they are absolutely wonderful.

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, "James ," *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) 181.

Everything good we receive is a gift. If we could see life as gift, we wouldn't harbor so much resentment and anger at that company or that boss or that friend or that spouse, whatever or whoever it is, who's not giving me what I deserve.

And frankly living as people of the gift is a much happier way to live. You're never disgruntled that someone didn't give you this or that, because that's not the reality in which you're looking from. You're looking at when the good things come, they're celebrated because they weren't deserved. Boy how interesting it is when we start looking from the reality of gift, how many gifts we begin to see all around us. For as one theologian said, "if reality is defined by the endless bestowal of gifts, then it is not a closed system but an open one, not a world of limited resources, but of infinitely renewable resources."²

The gifts are numerous, and when we start seeing them, our whole spirit changes. Now we're living as people of thanksgiving—our cups are beyond full, not half empty, and people are asking what's with those folks at Providence Baptist Church. They're always grateful; they consider it pure joy even in trials because they see that at least they're being used by God for something. God's working in and through them and they're thankful for that.

Some of the happiest people I know are those who have had the most destructive, horrible things happen to them. I have one friend who has survived cancer and another who is severely handicapped by cerebral palsy. These two friends are some of the happiest people I know. You know why? Because they've seen the worst of fear and suffering and survived. So they have nothing to fear anymore. They know they're not in control. They have a new lease on life—they choose to see everything as a gift. Each new days is a gift to them.

If we will live as people of the gift, we will lack nothing. We will be fulfilled. No wonder the psalmist said "You satisfy the thirsty, and fill the hungry with good things." Or Jesus saying, "I am the living water or the bread of life, come to me and you will never be thirsty or hungry again." This is the fulfillment he is talking about, not related to circumstance (pure joy even in trials). We can be truly filled and happy but only when we let go of expectations and rights and open up to gifts.

This week I want you to count your many blessings, name them one by one. Start naming the gifts out loud, begin noticing. "I can breathe today. Thanks be to God. I can see the mountains and hear the birds singing around me. Thanks be to God. I was able to eat three meals today. Thanks be to God. Someone listened to me today. Thanks be to God. I was able to fill up my car with gas, shoot, I have a car. Thanks be to God. I have a safe place I call home and find protection. Thanks be to God. I got to do something recreational. Thanks be to God. I have an education. Thanks be to God. That person just smiled at me. Thanks be to God. You get the picture.

² Johnson, 178.

And don't forget in your gift list to say your name out loud. Not only because you are a gift, but you have been called to be the gift for others. **This is the turn—not just that all these things have been created for you, but you've been called to *be* the gift**, and in turn, this is where you will find ultimate joy. For as St. Francis of Assisi said, "It is in giving that we receive." This is the way of Christ.

I think about people who give out of the sheer joy of it, without any strings attached. Can you think of one of these extremely generous people? You're drawn by them. You're mesmerized by them. How can they give so freely and not worry about their bank account? These people of the Gift leave an impression in our mind because they are sharing the person and love of Christ.

There is no better picture of the joy that giving brings—of being the gift—than that depicted in the movie *Babette's Feast*. Babette is a French woman who has lost her son and husband and finds a home on the Dutch coast with two pious sisters. These two sisters have continued the religious sect that their father started many years ago, which had dwindled down to about 10 members who are always bickering with one another. Babette serves as a loyal servant to them, but after fourteen years there, she discovers that she has won the French lottery of 10,000 francs.

Shortly thereafter, Babette discovers that the sisters are going to have a small celebration in honor of their father who would have been a 100. Babette asks if she can cook the small congregation a real French meal. Well, the sisters walk by the kitchen and see a huge sea turtle and spy large amounts of wine and hurry to gather the rest of the congregation forbidding them to say anything about what will happen and not to enjoy these indulgent tastes during the meal. The time comes and Babette makes an extraordinary meal. The first course is brought out, the delicious turtle soup. It's followed by stuffed quail in a puffed pastry shell, then exotic fruits and all the while with fine wine and champagne. It's hilarious to try to watch them almost bust out of their seams because they're trying to hold in their delight.

But out of Babette's great generosity and love affair with this meal, she transformed this small group. The group began to reconcile with one another. At the end of the meal they are all outside holding hands around the waterwell and singing to God. Later, thinking Babette would return to France because of her newly-won money, the sisters ask when she is leaving. But to their amazement, Babette tells them that she's not going back to France. She tells them that she spent all of her money on that one meal. For the sheer love and joy of it, she gave all that she had.

We are the people of the gift. The table has been set, and there are lavish delicacies to enjoy. And as those feasting at the table, we have been called now ***to be the gift***: to share and serve these rich foods and living water with others.

This is the picture of the church.

"Every good and perfect gift is from above." The table is set. Let's invite others to the table. Amen? Amen.