

Good Gifts

1 Timothy 4:1-4, 6:17-19

Dr. Jeremiah Ebeling ---- April 23, 2023

God wants you to be holy, not happy. I bet you've heard that dozens of times, right? Here's the only problem. It's not true. Well, it's not totally true. The first part—God wants you to be holy—oh, that's absolutely true. His ambition for us is that we might be holy, that we might become like Christ in all of life. And He has no deeper desire than that for each and every one of His children. That part's true.

It's that second part that isn't true. I think it's off. I think it's way off. And don't take my word for it. It's not something you're going to find in the Bible. When you open up the pages of Scripture you're going to see over and over again this truth: that our God is a heavenly Father who delights, who loves, to bring happiness to His children; that our heavenly Father loves to give us good gifts. He enjoys bringing us happiness. That's what you'll find when you open the pages of Scripture.

It's what the Bible tells us. And the Bible begins telling us that in the first two chapters of the very first book of the Bible. I mean, right out of the gate when God creates what we see is this truth, that He loves to delight His children. So, when He creates the first man and woman, He doesn't put them up in an apartment. No. He plants a garden to place them in, for them to enjoy. He plants this beautiful garden for them.



And then He sends a river running through it, and it waters the garden. And it's a river that Adam and Eve can enjoy, that they can bask in.



“And then the Lord God made trees that were beautiful and produced delicious fruit.” (Gen. 2:9) And so, He crafts these majestic trees that would produce apples and oranges, bananas, all kinds of wonderful fruits. And, you see, the trees could have been plain. The fruit could’ve been bland. But not if Yahweh planted them.

No, That’s not what He makes. No, He makes these beautiful trees for them to marvel at, these delectable fruits for them to partake of, for them to enjoy. That’s what we find.

There’s another word that we use that translates as this word “garden” in Genesis. Do you know what that word is? It’s “paradise.” That’s where they were. God planted Adam and Eve in paradise.

God Continues to Give Us Good Gifts

That’s what you see when you open the pages of Scripture, that there’s this extravagance, that there’s this incredible gift-giving that God does, that our heavenly Father loves to delight His children, that it brings Him satisfaction to please us as His people. This is what we discover about God. And so, several millennia later when the Apostle Paul writes a letter to Timothy, his protégé (it’s called 1 Timothy, it’s in our Bibles), what you see in this letter is that Genesis 1 and 2 are going to echo in the words that he writes to Timothy. The Garden of Eden is going to reverberate in the teaching that Paul is going to share with us in 1 Timothy.

1 Timothy 4:4

Everything God created is good.

Because this is what Paul writes. He says, “Everything God created is good.” Just like in Genesis 1 it says at the end of each day of creation, “And He called it good.” He said, “This is very good.”

1 Timothy 6:17

God ... richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

And then Paul writes that “God ... richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” You see, this is what Paul wants Timothy to know. It’s what he wants us to know, that God is still planting gardens. That’s what is true about our God, that He is still making wonderful things for us to enjoy, that He richly provides for us these good gifts in life. And He never runs out of them. He’s not frugal because He doesn’t have to be. He has everything at His disposal. He’s not working with a budget where He’s got to cut some corners or try to stay out of the red. No, His good gifts to us are plentiful. This is what we’re supposed to see in these opening chapters of Scripture, and then in 1 Timothy we see it again.

What this means is that every day is Christmas morning with God. God wraps gifts to us and sends them to us each and every day, all day. Are we looking for them? That’s what this means though, that He has created these gifts. He’s given them to us for our enjoyment, for us to appreciate and enjoy.

Did you know what the Greek translation of the word “enjoyment” is? It’s Blue Bell ice cream. Because God planted Brenham, Texas, home of Blue Bell ice cream, sometime after He planted the Garden of Eden. And on the first day He created “Homemade Vanilla” and He called it good. And sometime after that He made “Cookies ‘n Cream.” And then a little bit later, “Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough.” And then on the sixth day, He mixed those two together and He made “Cookie Two Step.” And then He rested. This is what God tells us.

So, look, when Dayna and I moved back to Austin fourteen years ago (we were out in no man’s land in southern California) ... when we got back to town, do you know the first place we stopped at? We had family here ... it wasn’t to see family. No, we stopped at an H-E-B, and we hugged that H-E-B. And the first thing we bought? Blue Bell ice cream. Absolutely. I tell you, I think it was two months straight that we had Blue Bell every single night. Not just two scoops—we kept going. It was amazing. It was a little overboard. We kind of had to stop at some point and slow it down.

But Paul’s point to Timothy is this: that our Father is extravagant in His gifts to us, in His kindness, His goodness, to us. He delights to bring happiness to His children. That’s what Paul is telling us.

And so, I wonder if this is how you think of God? Is this part of your understanding of Yahweh, that it pleases Him to make us happy, to bring us enjoyment? Is this how we think of God? Is this part of His character, part of who He is, part of how He treats us?

Pleasure is divinely designed to raise our sense of God's goodness.

--- J. I. Packer

There's a theologian named J. I. Packer, and he certainly believes it. Listen to what he says. "Pleasure is divinely designed to raise our sense of God's goodness." He says that God is a gift giver because of His goodness. It's just an expression of His benevolence. And the purpose of that goodness, the purpose of His kindness to us, is, first for our enjoyment, for our pleasure. But it has this greater purpose, too, of helping us to encounter God's goodness, of drawing us closer to Him in trust and appreciation, of bonding us to the gift giver that Yahweh is. That's what J. I. Packer says.

So, God wants us to be holy, but not happy? You're not going to find that in Scripture. Maybe it's this. Maybe God wants us to be holy more than He wants us be happy. I don't know if that's quite it either. I think God gives us happiness so that we might grow in holiness. Yeah, there it is. This is true about Yahweh—this is true about our God—that He is a gift giver and that He gives us things to enjoy, to bond us to Him in that trust and appreciation.

And so, surely there's no way to mess this up, right? Just receive and enjoy, right? This is what God intends. There's no way that we would mess this up, right? Wrong. You know, we never fail to find ways to distort, to twist, good things that God gives us. And unfortunately, that's the case here too. It's the case for every single one of us.

Two Diseases We Can Contract in Response to God's Gifts

And so, when Paul writes this first letter to Timothy, he's going to say, *Look, there are two deadly diseases that we can contract when it comes to God's gifts to us, when it comes to God's goodness to us.* And these are going to apply to us too. We're going to see them in our

hearts as well. He said that these two infections that can be contracted. But then he says there are also these two prescriptions. There are two solutions—there's a way out. There's a cure for each one of these two diseases. And so, he's going to show us that in 1 Timothy chapter 4 and then 1 Timothy chapter 6 as well.

Disease #1: Restricting God's Gifts

And so, let's jump in on that first disease that Paul warns us about. He tells Timothy, *Keep an eye out for this. You're going to see this.* That first disease is restricting God's gifts. We twist God's goodness to us by restricting His gifts. And what we do is we uproot the fences that God has placed around that garden of life where He has planted us and we move them in. We say, *This needs to be more confining.* We say, *These things out here are not good. They're not God's gift to us. We can't enjoy these things.* And we kind of set on rules. We make them up, we decide, we are the standard of what is good and what is not good. And we uproot those fences and we move them in and we replant them. And we say, *This is where we have to live now.*

You see that in 1 Timothy chapter 4. We're going to be in chapter 4 and chapter 6. In 1 Timothy 4, verses 1 through 3, look at what Paul says. This is going on in Ephesus at the time. It's going on here.

1 Timothy 4:1-3

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. ²Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. ³They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received ... by those who believe and who know the truth.

It says, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons." There's some heavy language here. "Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot

iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received . . . by those who believe and who know the truth.”

What was happening in Ephesus at the time at this church where Timothy was pastoring is there was this heresy going around that said that the good life, enjoyment, was unspiritual. The perspective was that pleasure was wrong because the body is evil. And Paul is warning Timothy about this heresy. And the teachers of this heresy said that marriage was not good and that certain foods that God had called clean were off limits. God has said, *No, absolutely, take, eat, enjoy*. And Christians at that time were hearing the teaching about these good things that God had designed and said that we could enjoy and they were hearing, *No, stay away from them*. And those fences were being uprooted and they were being moved in and replanted. What God had ordained to be good, this heresy said was no longer good. *Don't partake of that—don't enjoy that*.

And Paul has harsh language. He says, *Look, this perspective is a lie straight from hell*. He said, *This is the teaching of demons. It is demonic*. And those who propagate this lie, those who teach it have broken consciences. They don't work anymore. They don't work like God made them to work. And he says that there is no place for this disease of restricting God's gifts in the Christian life. *Let us not do that*, he says.

Instead, look—Paul's perspective is God's perspective, that God has placed us in this huge playground for us to enjoy, to fully partake of. And sure, there are fences around that playground, but even the fences are there to protect us. The fences are there to maximize our enjoyment. Because on the other side of those fences are things that will hurt us in body and soul, in spirit. And so, absolutely, God has planted those fences, those boundaries there, to protect us, to watch over us, to help us to enjoy fully the life that He's given us. And so, while God put those fences there, God's Word will say that those boundaries tell you when and how to partake of God's gifts in a way that will bring Him honor, that won't injure you. So, those fences that God has placed there are absolutely for our good. But what is evil, Paul says, is when we decide to uproot them, to take them and move them in and say, *No, this is what is now good*. And we define good gifts by our standards instead of by God's.

There a psychologist, Karen Horney, who describes what this disease does to a person, what it does to the mind and heart of a person. Listen to her description. It's poignant. She says, “You want to go on a trip, and the inner voice says: ‘You don't deserve it.’ Or, in another

situation, that voice says, ‘You have no right to rest, or to go to a movie, or to buy a dress.’ Or, in an even more general sense, that voice says: ‘Good things are not for you.’ You finish a great day of work, a hard day’s work, you’re tired, you want to rest, and that voice says: ‘You are just lazy.’ And you say: ‘No, I am just tired, I just need a little nap at the end of my tough day.’ And that voice says, ‘Oh, no, that is just self-indulgence.’ And after this back and forth, you either take a rest with a guilty conscience or force yourself to continue working without deriving any benefit either way.”

What’s so insidious about this disease is that this standard that we set up, these fences that we replant, don’t just stay with us. No, we spread this to other people too. And we watch what others do and we impose our standard, our rule for what is good and what is not good on others too. So, we find ourselves saying and thinking things like, *Well, that’s not how I would spend my money. Neither should you.* Or we think, *It’s wrong to put your children in that school or parent them in that way.* We say, *Christians aren’t supposed to drive cars like that.* Or maybe the perspective is *Marriage is no good. It doesn’t work.* Or, *There’s something not quite right about the single life.*

And we uproot those fences and we replant them according to us and our standard. And then we force it on others too. Paul says that when we do that, that’s evil. He said it’s wrong. It is from hell itself when we restrict God’s good gifts to us, these gifts that He’s given us to enjoy and appreciate, to praise Him for.

Prescription #1: Thanksgiving

But I love that Paul doesn’t leave us there. He doesn’t just tell us about the infection we can get when it comes to God’s good gifts to us. No, he says, *Look, there’s a prescription. Here’s some medicine. You want to be cured from this. Here’s the way out.* He said that it’s thanksgiving. It is giving thanks to God. And he’s going to say it twice in this passage to make sure that we don’t miss it.

Look in verses 3 and 4 of 1 Timothy 4. Paul writes, “They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.”

You see the prescription? It's thanksgiving. And why thanksgiving? Why is that a way out? Why is that a cure for this disease? I think certainly one of the reasons is that when we are giving thanks to God, when we are looking to Him, our eyes are fixed on Him. Right? Our energies are being directed towards to giving Him thanks for the gifts that He's given us. And so, we don't have energy left over to call bad what God has given us for good. We don't have energy to judge or to criticize others according to some other standard. No, our eyes are fixed on the Lord and on what He has given us so graciously.

I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.

--- G. K. Chesterton

I love how British theologian G. K. Chesterton says it. He says, "I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder."

Thanks are the highest form of thought. You will never think more deeply or be more appreciative or happy, even, when you are looking at all the ways that God has blessed you and you are thanking Him for those things. You're seeing those gifts that are scattered around you and you're saying, "Oh, dear God, thank You so much for Your overflowing generosity to me." Thanks are the highest form of thought. Gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.

And that's why thanksgiving is worship. It is worship. And when there's a lack of thanksgiving in our lives, it's a sign of a diseased soul. It's a sign of a hardened heart when we can't be thankful for what God has given us.

And I tell you, parenting makes this so clear, doesn't it? You know as a parent that there is something not right in the heart of your child when they can't be thankful for simple gifts, for simple things in their life. That gives you great concern as a parent when you witness that.

And so, for us, if we see thanksgiving as weak or even nonexistent in our lives, if we see it as lacking, I would say we don't need to grow up. I think we need to go back—back to being like a child in our relationship with the Lord. I think we need to ask God to give us the heart of a five-year-old towards Him in our prayers and in our thankfulness. Have you heard a child pray recently? Everything is fair game. When they're thanking the Lord for the things around them, they're praying for the family pet, for forks and napkins, for their teacher at school, for gummy

bears. Nothing is off limits. They pray for everything. They pray for what they see. They pray for what they experience throughout the day.

And the beauty of it is that we can live that way too. We can whisper “thank You” to God as we unwrap the gift of another sunrise or sunset. We can praise the Lord when we enjoy a glass of water when we’re parched. We can worship Him after an encouraging meal with a friend.

You know, this summer as we’re pulling out of our driveways to take those family summer vacations, what if we went around the car and everybody just took an opportunity not just to pray for safety—sure, pray for that—but to say, “Thank You, God. Thank You for the gift of vacation together. Thank You for the gift of rest, or refreshment. I get to go to a beautiful beach somewhere---or maybe a beach in Texas. But thank You. Thank You for Your kindness in that way.”

You see, here’s what is true about God. He always has an ear open to the thanksgiving of His people. He wants that from us. He wants that for us, because He knows that thanksgiving is a prescription to fully enjoy that life that He’s given us. He wants us to be thankful people, to give Him thanks for each of the gifts that He sends our way.

So, that’s the first disease. It’s restricting God’s gifts. It’s creating our own rules for what is allowed and what is not allowed, what is good and what is not good in the Christian life. Paul says, *Give thanks. Come on. Keep an eye out for all the goodness and the benevolence of the Lord in your life, and then just keep sharing with Him how thankful you are for that.* Ask God to grow that in you.

Disease #2: Elevating God’s Gifts

And then there’s the second disease, the second infection that we can take on when it comes to God’s gifts in our lives. He said it’s to elevate God’s good gifts. It’s to elevate those gifts and to elevate them to a level that God didn’t ever intend them to have, to place them above where they should be in our lives.

1 Timothy 6:17

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

And Paul warns Timothy about that in chapter 6, just two chapters later. In verse 17 this is what Paul writes: “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides with everything for our enjoyment.”

You see, one of the good gifts that God has given each one of us is wealth. And some of us here might think, *Well, I'm not wealthy*. But we are. We are. Did you know that the top one percent of the world's population in terms of wealth makes \$34,000 or more? Thirty-four thousand dollars—that's all it takes to be in the top one percent in the entire world when it comes to wealth. We are wealthy. If you had a choice of which shirt or which blouse you were going to wear to church today, you're wealthy. If you drove a vehicle to get to church this morning, you're wealthy. If you had a choice about which vehicle to drive to church this morning, you are exceedingly wealthy. Yes, we are. We are absolutely wealthy.

And a common disease that we can contract is to attach our identity to that wealth, to bring those together and to meld them together and to make our value and wealth, set it in the wealth that God has given to us. We can elevate our stuff, our gifts from God, to a level that God didn't intend.

And Paul says in the passage that there are two ways. The first way that you can elevate God's gifts beyond what He intends is arrogance. It's arrogance. It's to think that it's because of us that we are wealthy. It's our talents, it's our intelligence. And we take credit for what God has so graciously and generously provided for us. I think the slogan for that kind of arrogance is “I'm taking my talents to South Beach.” That's what a certain professional athlete said when he was leaving his team, when he was changing teams. Your talents? Those are your talents? Those are from God. God gave you those. And yet we say “my wealth, my stuff.” My wealth? My stuff? No, that's all from God. God owns it all. He's made me manager for a time—a fairly short time, actually—of His wealth, but it's all His. He owns it. I get to be a steward of it.

So, arrogance is one of the ways that we can elevate God's gifts beyond where He expects them, where He wants them to be in our lives. And then the other way that Paul says we can say elevate the gift of wealth beyond what God intended is that we stake our hope in it. We put our security on wealth. And that's our foundation—how our wealth is doing. And what happens is that our day rises and it falls with the stock market. Why would we ever do that? I've done that before. It was awful. It was miserable.

Prescription #2: Generosity

So, how do we get free from arrogance? How do we get free from putting our security in the gift of wealth that God has given us? Paul's got a prescription for that too.

1 Timothy 6:18

**Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds,
and to be generous and willing to share.**

This is what He says: Generosity is the way out. Generosity is the cure for that disease. And he says it in verse 18: "Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share."

You see, nothing kills materialism as fast as generosity. The best defense against the idolatry of stuff is to be willing to share. That's what Paul is telling us—the best way to detach our identity from our income is to regularly use that income to benefit others. Enjoy it? Oh, sure, absolutely—it's God's gift to you. Share with others? Definitely. That's what Paul is telling us.

So, if you gave your five-year-old a set of Legos, and your five-year-old runs to your little three-year-old and sits down next to him and says, "Hey, look at this. Let's play with these together!" wouldn't you celebrate that as a parent? You'd know that was a sign of a healthy soul. It's the same with God and how we handle the generosity that He has shown us.

And what I love about Grace Covenant Church is that so many of you see the wealth that God has entrusted to you in this way. You enjoy it, because it would be wrong not to. But you're so generous with it. You really are. Right now, there are at least a half dozen meal calendars floating around different groups and ministries at Grace as a way to serve and love individual

and families who just need a warm meal right now. They're under it. There's a community that just in the last couple of weeks has raised several hundred dollars for a single mom in our congregation because she needs help with groceries. She needs help with some broken appliances. She needs a new set of tires. Some of you share your vehicles with missionaries who come into town for weeks or even months. You open up your second homes to other families to enjoy. You're generous with the wealth, the gifts that God is entrusting to you for a time.

And what I love about what Paul says here, is that he says that everything we give away, we really keep. He says that everything we share we are just sending ahead to the next life.

1 Timothy 6:18-19

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and willing to share. ¹⁹ In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

Look at that in verses 18 and 19. It says, "Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life."

I love how God does this. He set up this matching fund program where everything we give away is doubled. Right? Of course, it goes to the original recipient. It goes to them. They get to enjoy that. But then whatever we give away, God matches that and He puts that in our eternal bank account. And He says, *I'll be holding it here for you when you get here.* He matches all of those funds.

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

--- Jim Elliot

That's why missionary Jim Elliot says this: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." God matches that. That's who our God is.

Generosity is the antidote to elevating God's gifts. It's the antidote to arrogance, to putting our hope in wealth, to finding our security or our identity in the gift of wealth that God has given us. That's what Paul says. That's what the Word of God says.

When I was a full-time student in seminary and Dayna and I were both working jobs that made about \$9.50 an hour, we had a friend. We had a good friend and his name was Frank. And Frank was one of those kinds of people, one of those men, who loved to be gracious with his friends. And so, what he would do is that every Sunday evening he would invite Dayna and me and several other friends over to his house—every Sunday evening. And he would cook for us. And it wasn't casseroles. It was rib-eyes on the grill. It was wine from Napa Valley. It was *tres leches* for dessert. It was a feast. And then on some of those Sunday evenings Frank would walk us out to our car and he would put an envelope in my hand with cash in it. And all he would say was, "Enjoy." Frank was the kind of man who loved to delight his friends. He loved to make his friends happy. He richly provided all of those things for our enjoyment.

And there were only two proper responses to his kindness. One is that we could never say "thank you" enough to his kindness to us. Dayna and I had never been poorer than we were in those days. But we had never been richer, because we had a friend like Frank. The second response was that it compelled us to actively look for ways to be gracious, to be generous with others, just as Frank had been with us.

Last year our friend Frank passed away. And I flew out to LA for his memorial. So many of us flew out to LA for his memorial. It wasn't convenient. It wasn't easy to get there. But we couldn't miss it. And that church where his memorial took place was filled with friends of Frank, with seminary students who'd come from all over to celebrate Frank Luna, to express their love and their appreciation to this man who had loved each one of us extravagantly.

You see, that's what our heavenly Father is like. He's a father who loves to delight His children. He enjoys giving us good gifts. His deepest desire for us is for us to be holy. There's no doubt about that. But He enjoys making us happy too. That's who God is.

Let's go to Him and give Him thanks that that is true about who He is.

The psalmist writes that, "Lord, You fill us with joy in Your presence, with eternal pleasures at Your right hand." And we will "feast on the abundance of Your house. You give us to drink from Your river of delights."

And Father, this doesn't have to be true about You, and this has to be true about You. This is who You are. This is Your character. And Lord, I pray that for each and every one of us that we would be eager and active in looking out for all the gifts that You give us, the ones that we enjoy each and every day, the new ones that You send along our way that we might have a heart of thankfulness to You, a soft heart, a caring heart. And I pray that You would make us generous, Lord, as You are; that You would give us a heart after Yours, that we might generously give to others, Lord, as You do with us, each and every day. We pray that in Your Son's name. Amen.