

Homily August 30 2009

Good; Better; Best—

I shall never rest

‘Till the good is better

And the better’s best.

Ever heard that? It’s a little rhyme children used to learn. On the one hand, it was used to teach kids how to use words that distinguish quality: Something may be *good*. Something else may be *better*. But something different may actually be *best* of all.

You know, children don’t come from the factory knowing how to distinguish quality. Someone must teach them how to do that. Many things may be good. A few of those good things may actually be better than the rest. But among those things that are better may be just one or two things that are the very best.

But that little rhyme was used for something more than just teaching kids how to use words. It also served the purpose of encouraging children to do their very best at whatever they did. The idea is: Try. Then, try harder. Keep working at it until you are the best you can be. If you can jump that high, raise the hurdle a little bit and try again. Keep raising the bar until you reach your own, personal best. Once you know how high you can jump you’ll be able to do two things.

1. When you know how high *you* can jump, you’ll be able to *encourage* other people to see how high *they* can jump.

2. When you know how high you can jump, you’ll be able to *appreciate* the skill of people who can jump higher.

In part, that’s what our reading this morning tells us. The writer is James, the half-brother of Jesus Christ. He didn’t believe Jesus was Israel’s Messiah until Jesus had been crucified, buried, raised from the dead, and ascended into heaven. Then, James believed. He became one of the key leaders of Christians in Jerusalem. He was known to be wise and just and often served as an intermediary in settling disputes and conflicts.

Our reading this morning comes from the beginning of his letter.

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### **James 1:17-18**

17 Every **generous act of giving**, with **every perfect gift**, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

There are generous acts of giving, James says.

“giving” = *dosis* (NT:1394) referring to “gifts” as a matter of debt and credit accounts. You go out for dinner and you tip the waitress. That’s a good thing to do. That’s a *necessary* thing to do because you know that the waitress can’t support herself if her only income is the hourly wage she’s paid.

Because you know she needs a little more, you are willing to give it. You also know that if people *don’t* tip the waitress, nobody will be willing to *work* as a waitress.

An old friend is a generous tipper. I used to criticize her for it, but she always said, “Hey, I *was* a waitress and I *know* they don’t make enough to live on. I also know that a lot of people under-tip. So if I can afford to give a little more, what do you care?”

Over the years it was kind of a running disagreement. She’d leave a big tip and I’d raise my eyebrows and she would give a huff and walk to the car.

Then one Sunday we met at The Sizzler for lunch. As the waitress walked us to our table, we passed what looked like the aftermath of a bomb blast at a bus station. Four or five tables had been drawn together and there were dishes and napkins and half-eaten food *everywhere*.

As we sat down my friend said, “Wow. Looks like you had a crowd.” “Yeah,” the waitress said, “there were about 20 of them.”

My friend said, “I saw \$2.00 on the table. Is that all they left you?”

The waitress looked down and said, “Yeah.” Then she leaned down toward us and whispered, “I really hate working Sunday mornings. That’s when the church people come. They’re the worst. They always want to slide tables together and they always want more coffee and more iced tea and they never leave a tip.” She shook her head and said, “I *hate* church people.”

Since that day I have never criticized my friend for over-tipping. That day, we ate \$15.00 worth of food and left a \$20.00 tip.

James says there are good gifts, good and necessary ways of giving money. A tip is a good and necessary gift of money. According to the waitress at The Sizzler, the only people who don’t seem to know that are Christians. The *good* gift is the necessary contribution to the table. If the necessary gift isn’t given, no one will be willing to *serve* the table. The generous gift comes from those who have a little more and give a little more so that people who *can’t* give a better tip can still enjoy the fellowship of the table.

I think the analogy of tipping at a restaurant may help you understand what James is talking about. But the early Jewish-Christians understood that James was talking about money given at the Temple in Jerusalem.

At the Temple, there were thirteen deposit boxes placed around the Court of the Gentiles. Each deposit box was in the shape of a trumpet. Coins clattered down the wide opening, through a narrowing shaft and into the box below. These trumpet-depositories worked like loud speakers. They broadcast the clink of coins dropping into the boxes. All day

long the sound of the trumpets, clattering coins given for the upkeep of the Temple and for distribution from the Temple to people less fortunate, was heard. This gift of money was the minimum necessary to keep the table of the Lord open.

This gift of coins was the good and necessary gift.

But James also talks about the *perfect* gift *dorema* (NT:1434). The perfect gift, the best gift, is the endowment Christians receive from God. The *perfect* gift from God is what allows Christians in whatever circumstance, rich or poor, healthy or sick, joyful or in sorrow—to live without becoming overwhelmed with a sense of *lack*.

The *good* gift is the minimum necessary to keep the table of the Lord open. The *better* gift comes from those who have a little more; it makes up for those who don't have enough to give the minimum to keep the table of the Lord open. But the *best* gift is the endowment all Christians receive from God. It is of greatest value because it gives any person the ability to live, not with an overwhelming sense of *lack*, but with an overwhelming sense of *contentment*.

That contentment comes from the knowledge that for you, God is Father. That's the Truth. As Father, God hears your prayers, sees your tears, and reaches toward you to meet your deepest need. Knowing your Father is near prevents you from felling a sense of lack.

Because God is light, no shadow or darkness can hide us from the Father's loving care and concern. Our Heavenly Father *always* sees and *always* hears.

### **James 1:19-27**

19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive them- selves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act — they will be blessed in their doing.

26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Anger. It's sand in the engine of the Christian life. Why? Why is human anger the sand in the engine of Christian life? Think about it. What lubricates an engine? Oil. Oil keeps the engine working. For Christians, the oil of gladness keeps the engine working. It's the gladness that comes from knowing that God loves you; that God blesses you; and, that your Heavenly Father gives you everything you will ever really need to be content. The oil of gladness, the recognition that you lack nothing, keeps your engine running.

But anger has the opposite effect on the heart. Anger in the heart is like throwing sand into your engine—it will make your engine stop in the night along the road home. Human anger comes from self-consciousness. Human anger comes when a person decides that what he has is *not* enough. Human anger comes when we stop looking to God with gladness, and begin looking at the people around us with jealousy: That guy has *more*; I don't have *enough*. It doesn't matter what. It could be money or sex or power or fame or respect of land or cars--. *What* the other guy has doesn't matter. All that matters is that he has *more* than *me*! It's not *fair*. I hate him 'cause he has *more*!

James says: Work at being a little less conscious of *you* and a little more conscious of *God*.

James says: Do. Look. Persevere. Act. Be blessed.

Five specific actions we can take to become the very best Christians. Five. It's the number of grace. Grace is given to us, like a present. But it takes a lot of work to keep the present working.

Someone gives you a 1947 Chevy convertible. It's a gift. But you're going to have to spend a lot of time in your garage working on it to keep it running.

You want to drive it around town Saturday morning. You go out to the garage and there it is: Dirty; seats torn; no gas; no oil; flat tire. Now you have a choice. What's your attitude going to be?

1. You might think: Stupid dad gave me this stupid car, and now *I* have to work on it to keep it running. Stupid dust all over it. Stupid paint job is dull. Stupid tire. I want to go fishing this afternoon. I've only had that Chevy a year and now I gotta *work* on the stupid piece of junk.

You slam the garage door shut and mutter, "Stupid dad."

2. Or, you might think: Wow! How great was *that* that Dad gave me this *classic*? Oops. I haven't worked on it since I got it, and it needs some attention. Let's see—I'll patch that tire; add some oil; fill it up with gas. I'll take it for a spin, then wash the dust off when I put it away. I'll give Les a call this evening and see if he knows where I can get a replacement tire. Maybe I'll stop by Helen's house and see if she knows anyone who's good at upholstery repair. I might not be able to get the fishing pole into my truck until 12:30 or so, but that's OK.

It's so cool Dad gave me the Chevy. I want to take care of it. Maybe I'll give it to my son one day.

Grace is a free gift, says James. But once you get it, you're going to have to make a serious effort to keep it running. You're going to have to make an effort, do some *work* to keep the gift of grace going:

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It takes *effort* for a good Christian to become a better Christian. It takes *work* for a better Christian to become the best Christian he or she can be.

If you are a *good* Christian, raise the bar a little bit and see how high you can jump. Don't get mad at the other jumpers. You're not on the track to beat them—you're on the track to find out where your own personal best really is.

**AMEN.**