

Scripture: James 2:12–18

Title: Do Not Be Fooled / Translated by YeaEun Han

1. Blessed Is the One Who Perseveres

From verse 12, the second introduction of James begins. In the first introduction, James urges us to persevere through trials and to live according to wisdom. In the second introduction, he warns us not to live according to our own desires in the midst of trials. Verse 12 connects the first and second introductions by mentioning the theme of perseverance once again and naturally transitions into the second topic. It speaks of how beautiful perseverance is. When you go to the gym, you see many muscular people. Rather than simply thinking they look impressive, I often think about how much perseverance and effort it must have taken to build those muscles. The result of perseverance is precisely their muscular body. It is currently the Winter Olympics season, and South Korea won gold medals in snowboarding and short-track relay. It is difficult for us to imagine how long these athletes endured and trained to earn the glory of a gold medal. Gaon Choi, who won gold in snowboarding, is only 17 years old, and at age 15, she underwent surgery to insert six metal pins into her spine due to an injury, yet she did not give up. She endured all that pain and ultimately achieved the glory of a gold medal. The Bible promises that a crown of life is prepared for those who endure and persevere through trials. In James 5:11, James reaffirms this truth: “Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.” By quoting the wisdom book of Job, James praises Job’s perseverance. He confirms that God shows compassion to those who endure incomprehensible suffering and seemingly meaningless affliction, just like Job. Romans 5:3–4 also supports this:

“Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” This aligns with James’ teaching. It means that through perseverance in trials and afflictions, we are made complete into mature beings. God does not remain still toward those who endure trials and afflictions. He prepares for them the most glorious crown of life. If any of you are suffering in ways you cannot understand and for no apparent reason, please persevere and endure. God declares that those who endure are blessed. The Lord has compassion on them and promises to rescue and reward them.

2. Do Not Misunderstand and Think God Is Testing You

Our natural response during trials and suffering is complaint and dissatisfaction. We may even think God is trying to make our lives miserable. When things do not go as we hope and circumstances unravel, we complain that God has once again made a mess of our lives. In verse 13, James addresses those with such

thoughts: "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone." Do not misunderstand God. God is not the one who tempts us. James consistently portrays God as a good Father. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: "If you, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:11) God is a good Father who gives us good things. Last week, as I lay down putting my youngest child to bed, I asked him, "Do you believe that Daddy is a good person?" I was slightly afraid of what I would do if he said no. Thankfully, he said, "Yes, I believe." I asked again, "You believe Daddy gives you good things, right?" He answered, "Yes." Then I said, "God is far better than Daddy. So God will give you good things." I could see that this logic made sense even to a child. Do not misunderstand God. He is a good Father who desires to give us good things. James tells us that the trials we experience do not come from God. So where do these trials come from?

3. Do Not Be Fooled by What Desire Promises

James says that when a person is tempted, it is because they are dragged away and enticed by their own desire. We must understand how powerful desire is. Desire has an attraction that pulls us in and the power to seduce and cause us to fall. In last week's sermon, I mentioned the idea of pursuing our "treasure," which can be equated to desire. In the movie *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a character named Sméagol, also known as Gollum. Sméagol belonged to a hobbit-like race and lived near a river. On his birthday, while fishing with a friend, the friend found the One Ring of Sauron. The moment Sméagol saw the ring, he became obsessed with possessing it. He strangled his friend to death and took the ring. Exiled from his village, Sméagol lived in the Misty Mountains for 500 years, gradually deteriorating away. His famous line was, "My Precious." Obsessed with the ring as his treasure, Sméagol fell into the sin of murder and ultimately destroyed himself. This vividly illustrates the biblical truth that desire conceives sin, and sin, when fully grown, gives birth to death. Treasure appears to promise everything, as He does. It is as if it can guarantee our happiness. We too can pursue something as our "My Precious," believing it will give us everything. James warns us not to be deceived by what our "My Precious" promises. Verse 16 says: "My dear brothers and sisters, do not be deceived."

We live in a world flooded with advertisements telling us that possessions will make us happy. We are told that if we own enough good things, we will live satisfied and joyful lives. Seeing others live that way makes it seem convincing. But do not be fooled. Sméagol's tragedy was not that he possessed the ring, but that the ring possessed him. Once the treasure began to control his life, he became its slave. Desire gives birth to sin, and sin, when mature, gives birth to death. The end of following desire is death. Paul describes the last days this way: "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy..." (2 Timothy 3:2) He even says that the love of

money is a root of all kinds of evil and warns that pursuing it leads people away from faith and into many sorrows (1 Timothy 6:10).

I have a painful experience myself. The iPad was released early in my marriage. At the time, I was known as an early adopter and was proficient using Apple devices. Even though I could not afford it, I really wanted an iPad. I searched for a used one online. I found one cheaper than others. Because prepayment was the condition, I transferred the money before receiving the product. My salary as a junior pastor was 700,000 won, and I sent 450,000 won. After several days, the product never arrived and the seller never responded. I had been scammed. I could not sleep for days. Even this small example shows that following desire ultimately damages us.

4. Earthly Wisdom vs. Heavenly Wisdom

James 3:14–15 mentions “earthly wisdom,” which is contrasted with heavenly wisdom. “If you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and do not deny the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.” Earthly wisdom can be called the wisdom of the empire. There may be insight even in the story of the empire. In the story of the empire there are also social strategies, skills for living, and teachings about how to live happily. But at the foundation of that story lies competition, and it presupposes a life that follows desire. We must not be deceived. If we live following “My Precious,” we can only arrive at death. How does desire give birth to sin? If we are captured by desire, we can only be dragged along wherever that desire leads us. Desire attaches itself to the host called self-centeredness and grows. When we fall into the trap of self-centeredness, we think we are sufficient on our own, and therefore we no longer depend on God. In the end, we become cut off from or separated from God. The Bible calls separation or disconnection from God sin. When we live according to our own desires, we end up serving ourselves as idols and exalting ourselves. The characteristic of those who regard themselves as idols is a narcissistic symptom that says, “I am a fine person.” “I worship myself. How worthy am I? You should revere me.” In order to prove that they are worthy people, they try to use possessions and social status, and they choose a life that pursues them.

At this point, a question arises. Is desire always bad? Is wealth absolutely unnecessary, and is recognition from others unnecessary? No. If there were no desire to eat, we would die. The desire to receive recognition from others is not evil. If I did not receive your recognition, I would gradually wither and lose strength. We are people who need one another’s recognition and encouragement. Wealth is also absolutely necessary for us to live a humane life. I can prove that I am a valuable person through my wages or compensation. However, money and other people’s recognition are necessary things, but they cannot become objects of worship. Wealth is merely a creation that God gives us to use where it is needed. The order must not be reversed. We must know how to use wealth; we must not follow wealth.

Jesus once spoke in the Sermon on the Mount about the fundamental limitation of mammon. It rusts. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. On earth, moth and rust destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." (Matthew 6:19–20) This means that we must not store up wealth for ourselves but spend it for God and neighbor. Because if we store it up, it will rust.

5. You Are What You Love

Why is Christianity losing its power in this world? When Christians are not much different from people in the world, it has no power. After the Reformation, Christianity was influenced by the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment begins with the belief that knowledge, reason, and science can advance this world. Before the Enlightenment, Western philosophy was ontology. Ontology is the fundamental inquiry into who I am, where I came from, and where I am going. But the one who began to put the brakes on this ontology was Descartes. He thought that being truly human does not begin from existence. He sought the reason a person is human not in existence but in cognition. "I think, therefore I exist. What makes me human is the fact that I think." As this epistemology entered Christianity, people began to believe that doctrine and biblical knowledge could change a person. Christian education therefore placed its focus on knowledge and understanding. The church's discipleship training also focused entirely on memorization and the transmission of knowledge. It was the idea that if one gained more knowledge, one could become a disciple of Christ. But knowledge did not fundamentally change Christians. Knowing that we should pray and having a desperate longing to pray are different things. We began to realize that unless desire changes and unless longing changes, a person does not change. We came to understand that knowing and wanting are different. A person is not called mature simply because he has attended church for decades and possesses much knowledge of the Bible. What matters far more is what kind of desire is rooted deep in that person's heart. It is about what kind of treasure one follows in the depths of the heart. Simply put, what one loves and desires is far more fundamental and essential than what one knows. Christianity lacks power because knowledge has not transformed life. Since what is fundamental has not changed and Christians are no different from people in the world, they have lost their influence.

In the neighboring state of Michigan, there is a university called Calvin College. It is known for having many Caucasian students and for teaching a Christian worldview. A professor at that school, James K. A. Smith, mentions what I just explained in his book *You Are What You Love*. For many years, Calvin College educated countless students in a Christian worldview. However, when they looked at the lives of those students, they realized that they were not very different from people in the world who hold a non-Christian worldview. Many graduates lived pursuing the American Dream sought by the general American middle class, without laying down their lifestyle even slightly for the sake of the gospel. What is the American Dream of the American middle class? It is the dream of living in the suburbs, owning a large house, and driving a large car. The point is not that such a life is wrong, but that there is no difference.

They did not change their way of life for the gospel and the kingdom of God. Professor Smith realized that unless desire changes, the person does not change, and he wrote the book *You Are What You Love*. In that book, Professor Smith says, "You are not what you know, but what you love." What you desire and love—that is who you are. Knowing is not the essence; loving is the essence. What you desire and what you love—that is the essence of a person.

6. Do Not Be Fooled

We follow our desires until we encounter something greater than ourselves. C.S. Lewis calls fixation on one's own problems pride. It means that the self has become too large. If I am still living while chasing my desires and cravings, it is evidence that I have not yet encountered something greater than myself. When we encounter something truly beautiful and magnificent, we forget ourselves. When we meet a being greater than ourselves, we can quite easily escape from our problems. Standing before breathtaking nature does this. Although it is difficult in Minnesota, when I was in Korea I liked climbing mountains. Especially when I was going through difficult times, I liked climbing Ansan or Bukhansan near my home. When I climbed a mountain, the world below looked small. Then the problems I was struggling with also appeared small. The high vantage point connected me to a greater world and freed me from the small problems I was wrestling with. One morning, after finishing work early at church and heading home, the sun began to rise. Clouds were spread above Rochester's corn tower, and as the sunlight shone on them, the orange sky was magnificent. It was so beautiful that joy welled up in my heart and I began to praise God. When we stand before One more excellent than ourselves, One more beautiful than ourselves, we can be released from our desires. Only when we meet something far more glorious than our desires can we be freed from them. Romans 8:5 says: "Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit." It says that only by being captured by the Spirit and living according to the Spirit can we be free from the desires of the flesh. The Holy Spirit leads us to the Father's love. The Holy Spirit reveals how good a Father God is. The one who realizes that every good gift and every gracious blessing comes to him from the Father of lights in heaven can escape self-centeredness. Since everything given to me is God's gift, I can live a life of sharing that gift with others. Do not be fooled. Do not live to satisfy your desires. Do not live a life that follows desire. In order to do so, you must practice living according to the desires of the Spirit. Lent has begun. It is a season to encounter something greater, something more beautiful, someone more excellent. It is a season to make greater effort to meet the great God who makes us forget our problems. In church tradition, three practices have been emphasized during Lent. They are fasting, prayer, and good works. Having grown up in an agricultural culture, breakfast is a precious liturgy I cannot easily give up. But this year during Lent, I have given up breakfast and am practicing a morning fast. I am trying not to stop at fasting but to practice prayer and good works. I encourage you also to reorient the direction of your

desires toward God through your own practice. As you intentionally practice fasting, prayer, and good works, may this be a blessed Lent, deeply connected to the great God and filled with longing to live for His kingdom, in the name of the Lord.

<Small Group Sharing>

1. What is the most cherished treasure of your soul?
2. Do you agree with the statement, "You are not what you know, but what you love"? If so, how do you think one can change and readjust their desire?(Think about this in connection with the changes that occur when you encounter a higher perspective, a world grander and more beautiful than yourself, or values far more precious than your own.)