'Wisdom for Life'

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Date: 18 October 2026

Preacher: Mark Chew

[0:00] And as you've heard, Rihanna introduced our service today. We are looking at the topic of wisdom. And the key question I guess today is how do we live wisely?

Or what does it mean to live wisely? To have a set of principles or guidelines perhaps that kind of gives you guidance in life, gives you direction in life, where you're not kind of chopping and changing every time you hear someone say this or another person say that, where you're swayed, aren't you?
Back and forth with often what is conflicting advice or opinions. And you only have to get onto the internet for every question.
There's often 20,000 opinions as to what to do. So whether it's career choices or life partners or even the call to full-time ministry, there are often myriad options with uncertain outcomes in life.
And we want to know, don't we, that as we make our decisions, some of which there is no turning back, that we're doing it wisely. And so many people, even though they don't quite articulate as such, crave wisdom in order to live their life with confidence.
[1:23] And that's the topic that James moves on now to chapter 3 of his letter. Because having dealt with the wise use of the tongue, specifically last week, he now tackles the topic of wisdom more generally.

Now it appears at the time that there were some Christians, remember they were being spread or scattered across the Roman Empire as a result of persecution in Jerusalem. There were some who thought that they were wise and full of understanding.
Others, perhaps those that are young in their faith, may be looking for people they could look up to, wise people they could emulate. And so listen now to what James says in verse 13 as he applies what I call the litmus test for wisdom.
And so he asks, Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.
But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. And so we can see, can't we, where the test is.
[2:38] It's not that the wise are those that are capable, for example, like me as a preacher, coming up and being able to wax lyrical about this or that topic and be philosophical or have sage words.

No, the test is good deeds evident in their lives, good deeds which are done in humility that comes from wisdom. Now, just as the words from our tongues can be traced back to what was or what is in our hearts, that's what we saw last week, so our good deeds done in humility can be traced back to wisdom.
And just as faith results in good works, true wisdom should and will manifest itself in what we do. Or, I think more importantly, not just what we do, but how we do them. And so for those claiming to be wise, James is asking, well, what do you have to show for it?
Do your lives testify to that wisdom? Or are you leaving a trail of destruction wherever you go, wherever you've been given responsibility, and damaging people that you lead in their teams?
[4:00] Now, we've seen some of this in history, haven't we? Like cult leaders who mesmerize people with their sage words only for them to, you know, actually be abusing their followers and brainwashing them.

And sadly, for some of these followers even, to go so far as to give their lives for the cause. Now, over time, our deeds reveal the true motivation in our hearts, don't it?
And just as I was saying last week, Jesus said, out of the abundance of our hearts, the mouth speaks. Well, not only our mouths, right? But actually, our lives speak as well.

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And it's by our deeds, James says, that we differentiate the type of wisdom that we have. And he names that there are two kinds in this world, earthly or heavenly wisdom.
What kind of wisdom we have then is seen in our deeds, shaped by our motivations. And so if that's the case, then what it should really prompt us to do, again, just as it was with our tongues, is to look back into our own hearts to see what's there.
[5:14] Because the mark of heavenly wisdom is not that, you know, you're able to read people well, you're able to size up a situation, you have EQ, emotional portion, or you have insight or foresight to be able to predict the future.

Rather, it's about what we do with such insights and wisdom that shows the kind of wisdom that we possess.
Because if your motivation is being selfish, envious, both of which are all putting self above others, then the deeds that follow are, as James says now in verse 15, such wisdom, quote unquote, does not come down from heaven, but it's earthly, unspiritual, demonic.
For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. And so such wisdom may at first look pretty savvy or cluey, right?
You know, if you're in business, someone who may be able to, you know, who may have mastered the art of the deal. Someone wrote a book about that in case you didn't know.
[6:31] Or if you're in politics, you know how to spin the situation in the media or being a good negotiator in parliament. Or if you're brilliant at marketing, you know, the phrase able to sell snow to the Eskimos.

Or maybe on social media, one of those celebrity influences, you know, with a million followers. They look kind of cool at first, don't they? Kind of impressive.
But over time, their underlying motivations reveal themselves. Because people see through the facade, right? And after a while, they feel deceived, manipulated.
That actually, all this is not for, it's not for us actually, it's for themselves. And so resentment builds, doesn't it? You get retaliation, and then we get conflict.
Such earthly wisdom, James says, is demonic and unspiritual. And actually, if you think about it, it's what the devil himself did with Adam and Eve. Because if you go back to Genesis 3, what was it that the serpent enticed Eve with?
[7:44] Can you remember? He promised, on the slide, verse 5, that by eating the fruit, they would be like God, knowing good and evil.

So, what is actually promised by the serpent was what? Wisdom, wasn't it? Knowing good from evil. Just like God.
Except, of course, this wasn't from God. It was from the devil. Now, by contrast, heavenly wisdom, or wisdom from God, is the opposite. Because the motivation there is to use this knowledge and insight, not for ourselves, but for others.
And that's what humility is, isn't it? deeds done in humility, putting others before ourselves. You know, when you have the EQ to know that someone is feeling vulnerable, let's say in a situation, do you use that insight to your own advantage, or actually for that person's well-being?
How you use it actually determines whether your wisdom, your motivation, is heavenly or demonic. So, give you an example, and some of you I know have faced this situation because you're kind of in the job market looking for a job.
[9:06] But let's say, if you're a boss and you're wanting to hire a new person, you know, you as a boss, you know that most applicants would be keen to please you, right? They're pressured to say yes.

They want the job. And so, you know, you can take advantage of that, can't you? Before you offer them the job, give them a long list of your things you want them to do, right?
To enslave them, right? So that they will sign on the dotted line and you've got them hooked. Do you use that kind of knowledge to advantage? Or actually, are you the kind of boss, one day, maybe even now, that will care for this vulnerable new employee instead?
Same knowledge, same insight, isn't it? But very different outcomes or deeds. And so James describes heavenly wisdom like this in verse 17.
But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy, and good fruit, and impartial and sincere.

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[10:12] Now, as I was saying last week, purity is the concept where something is untainted, unstained, not a drop of impurity, not a speck of dirt.

all it takes is one drop of that to make the entire thing impure. Well, only God can give that kind of wisdom that's pure, isn't it?
That's why it says it comes from heaven. And James says, it's first and foremost marked by the quality of purity. It's untainted, it's unstained.
Not a single spot comes with God's wisdom. And as Daniel prophesied after God revealed to him the meaning of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, as Peter was reading it, this is what he said.
He changes times and seasons. He deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. And then on the next slide, he says, he reveals deep and hidden things.
[11:19] He knows what lies in darkness and light dwells with him. And so if you just dwell on that last two lines for a minute, this is actually how God can retain purity in his wisdom.

Because it says there that he knows what lies in darkness. That is, God knows what is evil. And yet, darkness and evil are themselves foreign to him because it then says, only light dwells with him.
So if you think about this, God knows all things, good and bad. He sees into the hearts of everyone all the evil things that people do.
He understands and he knows. And yet he himself, because light only dwells with him, is motivated by not evil, but good.
That is the kind of wisdom that actually God wants to give us. You know, it's not being naive, because to be naive is actually not to know what is good versus evil.
[12:28] No, to be wise is to know both good and evil, understand it, and yet be only motivated by good. Can you see the difference?

Motivated by wanting to use that wisdom for the blessing of others, putting others ahead of ourselves. Now, I just want to digress for a bit because James doesn't really talk about this, but we know from the rest of the Bible that the ultimate wisdom is found in the gospel, isn't it?
It's found in the cross, it's found in Jesus. And this is not different to the wisdom that's being taught here, but what Paul is saying is that all the wisdom that God has is best encapsulated, is best seen, is best revealed, when we look at Jesus and we look at the cross.
That is the kind of wisdom that God wants to give us. But of course, when James is talking about here wisdom, he's talking about wisdom then that is applied in other situations practically.
But it should reflect the gospel. It should reflect selflessness, which is what Jesus did by dying on the cross for us. And then we can see the results of this wisdom back in verse 17, that it will be peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy, and good fruit, impartial and sincere.
[13:52] And such things are motivated by humble love for others. All of them require selflessness, don't you, when you look at the list? To strive for peace is actually to make way for other people's wishes, instead of just insisting that it's got to be my way.

Being submissive doesn't mean we're being trampled on, but rather it's being willing, you know, willingly allowing others' needs to come before our own, to accommodate for them.
And for example, if we're in authority, then to have the quality of mercy is to not use our power and our advantage and our knowledge for ourselves, but instead to be generous and kind to the one that is in need of mercy.
Same with being impartial and considerate. So, to come back again, what kind of wisdom we have is eventually revealed in our deeds.
They show the motivations that have shaped how we use the insights and knowledge we've gained. Are we motivated when we act?
[15:04] Are we motivated by selfish ambition and envy or by selfless and humble love for others? And then of course, eventually, depending on which type of wisdom we practice amongst ourselves, that will then reveal the type of community that we're trying to build and which flourishes in our midst.

And so for those who pursue heavenly wisdom, which is hopefully us, we, in verse 18, peacemakers, will sow in peace in order to reap a harvest of righteousness.
While on the other hand, if demonic wisdom is pursued, then this is what occurs. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

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You desire, but you do not have, so you kill. You covet, but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. Two very different outcomes, isn't it?
based on two very contrasting motivations. One of selflessness, one of selfishness. And what we get is either righteousness, a harvest of righteousness, or the other, a situation of discord and strife.
[16:21] And here's where I think for me, the image of a garden or a field or a plantation is being conjured. And you see a plentiful harvest right in front of you.

And that's because the words there suggest it, sowing, reaping, harvesting. That's the kind of picture we get, isn't it? Because if you think about it, the communities we live in, for example, here as a church, we're like a field, aren't we?
Kind of ecosystem. And what we sow together, we will reap. So for the peacemakers who sow in peace, motivated by humility, well, the result amongst us will be a harvest of righteousness.
Right? Now that doesn't mean that there'll be an absence of conflict among us. Because the idea of peacemaking, you just think about that word, peacemaking implies that there is some disagreement.
Otherwise, you don't need to make peace, right? So it's not like there is no differences in our community and we just kind of kumbaya all the time. But rather, peacemaking is about learning to live well together despite our differences.
[17:37] Learning to resolve our differences in a loving way. And a community that does that doesn't need to sweep things under the carpet.

We don't need to say, oh, look, that's so divisive. Let's not talk about it. No. We can't talk about such things because there are things that are fundamental, aren't they? There are things such as good and evil, right and wrong.
Things worth defending that are right and good. So we should talk about things when they are not right instead of sweeping things under the carpet. But the difference is how we go about it, isn't it?
So that even if someone is wrong, like poor Alex here, right, our aim is not to just beat him down and tell him how wrong he is just so that I can prove how right I am, but rather the aim is to try and gently restore the person in the wrong for his best interest, isn't it?
Now, on the other hand, where there is strife, then what it leads to is a trail of devastation like this other picture here, right? And the result is what we saw in verses 1 to 3.
[18:47] Fighting, quarreling, killing, strife, ultimately a community at war. Now, where do all these come from? Well, it says that it comes from the evil desires that battle within us.

Coveting, which is fueled by selfish ambition and envy. And so here's the thing that I think we need to realize sometimes that we may be right at times, particularly in church.
We may be theologically right, doctrinally right even, but if our motives are selfish, then actually when we then kind of talk it out and do things as a result of that, what will result is not heavenly but demonic wisdom.
So what I'm saying is that you can have right theology and still have demonic wisdom. You may be standing firm in what is true, that I, you know, go to the heart of the gospel, but if the way you treat others as a result of that is to be arrogant, then it does not reflect God's wisdom at all.
Now sometimes there are things that actually simply are different ways that people want to do things. So this morning I told the people at St. John's, which is a bit more relevant than for you, that, you know, sometimes there's tradition and contemporary services, right?
[20:18] And, you know, there are, in one sense, just two different ways of doing things. But somehow we get so attached to these things that they almost get elevated to the status of good versus evil.

Now, I think for you, I don't know, traditional is good or bad? Contemporary is good or bad? I think you love both, right? That's a good thing about 5pm. But really, is it really about good and evil or just wanting to have our own preference?
Now, there are other times, for example, with different denominations, let's say, and I know you guys have explored a bit about that, where different churches just do things differently.
So, case in point, might be baptism or ordination. Now, in those cases as well, I think wisdom, heavenly wisdom, means that we actually respond graciously.
We don't have to be relationship experts, do we, to realize that if we don't do these things, then what we sow is strife. And what we get is division and conflict and warring.

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[21:28] Sometimes among churches, but sometimes even within a church. And when that happens, it shows that what we're doing is just thinking about ourselves and wanting to have our own ways rather than saying, how can we sow in peace even as we strive to do what is right?

Not saying we ignore it and just do whatever. We want to do what is right, but how we go about doing it is just as important if we want to pursue heavenly wisdom.
Because if we don't do that, then James goes on to say that God wouldn't even bless when we pray. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures, that is, to get what you want.
And God knows our hearts. And trust me, He will not reward wrong motives, evil motives, which no one else may be able to see, but He can.
He's not going to reward evil motives with good outcomes, even if we dare to ask for it in the first place. Now, here's the thing, because James, at the very start of the letter, he did say that if anyone lacks wisdom, James 1, verse 5, the promise is that He, God, will give generously without finding fault.
[22:50] And this is the wisdom that he's talking about here in chapter 3, right? Chapter 4, heavenly wisdom that leads to a harvest of righteousness. So, what do we make of it? Because there it says God will give without finding fault, but here he says God will not give even when we ask.

Well, if we look closely here, it's clear, isn't it? What we need to do when we ask, there is a condition, is to ask with the right motive. And that is, we need to look back again into our own hearts.
That is, when we ask, we need to ask not because we want to spend it on ourselves, but rather because we want to use it wisely, humbly, to love others in order to reap a harvest of righteousness.
And such wisdom, James says, back in chapter 1 and verse 21, comes from God's implanted word, which again, we need to humbly accept and commit to doing in order for God's wisdom to be seen in us through the good deeds.
But here's another conundrum, right? Because again, I said last week that our tongues betray our hearts and we know that because our tongues are full of restless evil and deadly poison, it shows that our heart at the very least is not pure.
[24:17] So, how do we then receive this heavenly wisdom, which is utterly pure, into our hearts, which is not pure, in order to be able to do all that God wants us to do?

How do we receive the pure word of God, the wisdom from God, without tainting it with the evil desires in our hearts? Well, thankfully, God also gives His Spirit as He gives us His wisdom.
The wisdom comes through His Word, but God's Spirit then uses His Word and wisdom to start changing us from within. And that's the wonderful thing about God, isn't it?
Because I said earlier that for something to be pure, it can't be tainted. You know, you just add a drop of blood or something and it's impure, right?
It's stained. But what happens is that when the Spirit comes into our lives, even though He's utterly pure and He's coming into a life that is not pure, He's able to do the opposite, make what is impure, pure over time as we yield to the power of the Spirit at work in our lives.
[25:31] But yield we must, which is what James has been teaching us to do, right? Humility, repentance, hearing God's Word and then doing it, prayerfully asking for wisdom, guarding our tongues, putting into practice our faith.

If we do all this, then God will over time allow us to practice heavenly wisdom, which is then becoming purer and purer in our lives.
Now friends, if you love Jesus, what I want to leave you with tonight is a vision of how to live wisely, which I hope will inspire you. It's like a life goal if you like.
And you know, I started by saying that many people are seeking wisdom and often they seek wisdom and I'm sure we're all the same. I'm guilty as well. We always, we often tend to seek wisdom for ourselves, don't we?
Right? How can I be wise so that I can get ahead in life? So that I can persuade others to do what I want. What can I get that kind of wisdom? Fantastic, isn't it?

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[26:34] How can I be wiser so that my life could be easier? Or if you're getting to my age, how do I become wise so that I can set myself up for retirement? Well, James is actually telling us tonight that wisdom isn't you living well for your own benefit.

But rather, James is asking us to seek wisdom so that we can use it to benefit others. And so here's the vision and here's the life goal.
With God's wisdom, will you live humbly for others so that you can reap a harvest of righteousness? So think of yourself as a farmer in life.
Okay? I know you. Or gardener if you don't want to be a farmer. And think of those relationships that you have in your life as fields that God has given you to sow in.
Okay? So you may have multiple fields like at uni, there's a little field there, maybe. In your family, and you've got some work now, your workplace is another field. Your friendship groups, the church.
[27:42] Okay? These are all fields and the vision is for you then to sow in peace into those fields so that what emerges from it is a community of righteousness.

One filled with mercy, fairness, trust, kindness, kindness. So if you're a leader, then you've got greater responsibility, don't you? Because you get to set the tone and the culture of that community. If you lead a team or you lead a growth group, let's say, that's that little patch of garden that you have each Wednesday or each Sunday that you're working on.
Reflect Christ-like culture because you've sown in peace. Now, even if you think you're just a lowly person, so you think, your acts of peace and actions motivated by selflessness can have that positive and lasting effect in the field that you're in.
So, that entire field might be a disaster, but you yourself can be that oasis, can't you, that draws people to you as they try and flee from all that discord around them.
[28:53] because here's the vision I would like you to have when you get to the end of your life, that you can look back at your life and see a plentiful harvest of rich and rewarding relationships that you've sown into, right?

When you look back and you see, whether it's your family, your friends, places you've worked, the church, places, fields that have been filled with love and joy, because there you have cared and blessed people.
There you have been cared for and blessed by others, where you've experienced God's goodness to you time and time again through others, but also through yourself being a blessing to others.
You know, not just, I've got one or two good friends here or there, no, but actually you have this thick and rich relationship of friendships, of network of relationships, relationships, where you've played your part in being that peacemaker, where you've sown in peace.
And of course, at the very heart of it, the most important field, I'd say, is actually the church, isn't it? Because that is where God's spirit is, and all of God's people are yielding to God's spirit.
[30:14] So this place here, our church, should be the best garden of all, isn't it? The best plantation. The harvest here should be like that, if not more, isn't it?

Because all of us are sowing, every one of us, not just some, but every one of us are sowing with God's wisdom, isn't it? Peace, and then allowing God's spirit to purify us so that we're living for one another rather than for ourselves.
That's a lifelong kind of work, isn't it? But it's a vision, I think, that's worth having. And I don't know how many years God's going to give you or me, but it would be great, wouldn't it, that as we enter God's eternal kingdom, we can look back and go, wow, what a harvest.
What a harvest. Thank you, God. Thank you, God, for your wisdom. Let's pray. Amen. Father, thank you that you give to us true heavenly wisdom, which, when we ask, you give without finding fault, provided we use it with the right motives.
And so, even though our hearts and lives are still tainted, we thank you that the blood of Jesus has washed us clean. Please, by your spirit now, help us to humbly accept and do your word and to sow in peace in order to produce good works that spring from this wisdom.
[31:50] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.

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