

Living Wisely

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[0 : 00] It would be great if you could turn to your Bibles again, to James chapter 3. Hopefully you might even have it open still, but if not, please open it to James chapter 3.

We'll be working our way through that tonight. You might have realised as Krista was reading it that James doesn't pull any punches tonight. It's pretty full on.

So how about I pray again that we would hear what God is saying and rightly do business with him for his glory.

So let's pray. Father, we do thank you again for your word. We thank you that it says it how it is. Father, it reminds us of what we are like, but it also reminds us of what you are like and your graciousness towards us.

Father, we pray that you might help us to hear these truths afresh tonight. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, one day a schoolteacher gave her class some wise sayings or proverbs that people have penned over the years.

[1 : 05] But she only gave them the first half of the saying and then asked them to finish it off. So on just the next slide, just hit it once. So the first one, for example, she gave the penny saved is a penny earned.

But this is how the student replied on the second half. So on the next bit, penny saved is not much. So I'm going to try a few of these and see if you can guess the second half.

So on the next slide, don't bite the hand that... Okay, this is what the kid said. Don't bite the hand that looks dirty. That's pretty good advice as well, actually, isn't it?

What about the next one? Two's company but threes. Okay, the kid said, two's company but threes, the musketeers. Fair enough.

Next one. When the blind lead the blind. You know this one? It's from the Bible. It's both fall into the pit. Yeah. The kid said, when the blind lead the blind, get out of the way.

[2 : 09] Which is not too far from Jesus' saying, actually, in Matthew 15, the Pharisees were the blind. And Jesus is basically saying, have nothing to do with them. Of course, we can get wisdom not just from proverbs or sayings that people have penned over the centuries, but from other places like fortune cookies, for example.

And so on the next slide is a picture of a fortune cookie. It says, marriage lets you annoy one special person for the rest of your life. I'm not sure if that's true. Anyway, next slide.

This is important. Life or death. Make sure you... It's, yeah, not very helpful, is it? What about the next one? I hope you didn't eat the shrimp too late, if you had.

So, you know, fortune cookies, they're pretty ordinary for wisdom as well. We can go a bit more serious. We can go to some gurus. There are some gurus out there. There's a guy called Sri Sri. I think, I don't know if I'm pronouncing his name correctly, but he's the fifth most powerful man in India. And this is what he says. He says, become God to each other.

[3 : 12] Do not look for God somewhere in the sky, but see God in every pair of eyes, in the mountains, in water, in trees, and in animals. And he's got this foundation called the Art of Living Foundation, which gives advice, wisdom for how to live life.

Now, I'm not exactly sure what he means here. He could be just saying that you can see God's mark in the world, in everything he's created, which is true. Or he could be saying that everything is sacred.

I'm not sure. But the point is, there are lots of places we can go for so-called wisdom. Now, I should point out that wisdom is knowledge about how to live well.

It's not so much about being smart at mathematics or science or English. It's about knowing how to live well in this life. And for James' readers, they seem to be following their own selfish wisdom that

tells them how to live the way that they want, instead of following God's wisdom found in God's word.

And so James begins by pointing out there are actually two types of wisdom, but only one of them is from God. So we're at point one on your outline and verse 13. Have a look there in your Bibles at verse 13.

[4 : 19] He says, 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.

You see, it seems as though some of James' readers thought they were pretty wise. But James says, If you think you're wise, then show it by the way you live. And we're back to James' theme again, aren't we?

About faith that works. About faith that shows itself in action. And James is saying here, Well, just as real faith shows itself in action the way we live, so real wisdom or true wisdom will show itself in the way that we live.

And for James, this literally means a lifestyle of good works done in humility. That's what it literally says. James is saying true wisdom will show itself in a life of good works done in humility. Humility is one of those characteristics that generally we find attractive in other people, but we don't always have ourselves. But it's about putting others first, and particularly about putting God first, doing good.

[5 : 27] It's fearing God and shunning evil, as we heard from Job 28. It's a key quality of true wisdom. But it seems that James' readers were living by another type of wisdom, their own.

Have a look at verse 14. He says, But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it and deny the truth.

Such wisdom does not come down from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice, he says.

You see, some of the readers were claiming to be wise. They even boasted about it. But James says, don't boast that you're wise and deny the truth. Because the truth is, you're not.

You're not truly wise. Just look at the way that they live. They are envious, selfish, not humble. And so such wisdom is not from God above. Rather, it's simply following their own desires.

[6 : 31] It's a false wisdom. And we get a glimpse of this in chapter 4, verse 1. Just skip for a moment to chapter 4, verse 1. He says, The word for desires there in 4, verse 1 is the word where we get hedonism from, pleasure.

The wisdom they live by is simply their pleasures and selfish desires. It's their desires that tell them how to live. Like wanting something, so fighting and quarreling to get it.

But such desires are not true wisdom. In fact, if we come back now to chapter 3, verse 15. Do you notice what James calls such selfish desires, such wisdom?

He calls it earthly, unspiritual and demonic. Demonic of demons. Again, James is not pulling any punches, is he? But why is following their own desires demonic?

Well, verse 16 tells us, because it leads to disorder and evil practice. Like the fights and quarrels we just saw. And that's why it's demonic and evil. Because it leads to evil, you see.

[7 : 45] There's this old movie called Envy on the next slide. It's got these characters, Jack Black and Ben Stiller. I'm sure you're familiar with these guys. Anyway, Jack Black's character invents this product for people with pets who don't like cleaning up after their pets.

And the product is a spray can which you spray on your pet's droppings and it disappears. It vaporises. And the product is called Vaporise. As you can see there. Yes, it's a silly movie.

Not recommended. But anyway, Ben Stiller's character gets really jealous because Jack Black gets rich on this scheme. And Ben's jealousy and envy leads to all sorts of evil things.

He sets his friend up and does all sorts of things. But that's the point. Envy and selfishness are unspiritual and demonic because they lead to all sorts of selfish and evil practices.

Bad behaviour like fights and quarrels. And in case we're too quick to judge these readers, we must remember that envy and selfishness is our natural tendency too.

[8 : 54] We have a natural tendency to live by our earthly desires, to live by unspiritual wisdom, if you like. After all, we were all born with sinful hearts, which are selfish.

You never have to teach children to be selfish, do you? They do it all on their own. You have to teach them to share, to be unselfish. And why is that the case?

Well, because it comes naturally to them. And we're the same. Our natural tendency is to be selfish, to envy. I mean, if we see someone who earns more money than we do or has better clothes or better marks at school or university, has that special someone that we don't have or gets a better job than we do, then is our first thought, I'm so happy for you, or I wish I.

Gord Vidal, an American writer, once said, When I see a friend succeed, a little something in me dies. But we all are prone to envy and selfish ambition.

And when we live that way, we are living according to a false wisdom, says James. A false way of life. But true wisdom, on the other hand, is from God. And we've already seen in verse 13 that it includes humility.

[10:06] And then James unpacks it even more in verse 17 to 18. So have a look there in your Bibles, verse 17 and 18. He says, Instead of evil and selfishness, God's wisdom is pure and peace-loving.

In fact, do you notice how the word peace comes up a few times just in those verses there? It seems James wants to highlight peace, given his readers' tendency to fight and quarrel.

In fact, these other words are so... Sorry, so God's wisdom for life teaches us to be considerate, to be peaceable, to seek peace with people, to be forbearing.

Actually, the word considerate literally means forbearing, bearing with one another, instead of snapping and fighting. God's wisdom teaches us to be submissive or literally open to reason.

To be reasonable, to be able to put yourself in the other person's shoe and to see where they're coming from. God's wisdom also teaches us to be full of mercy, it says, forgiving one another.

[11:27] I mean, how many fights and quarrels would be prevented if we were full of mercy and forgave? And God's wisdom is also impartial and sincere.

What's more, it helps us to live that righteous life that God desires, as we saw in chapter 1, verse 20. This is what it means to live wisely, you see.

I don't know if I've told you this story before, but Brett was a guy who used to come to our church. Brett is not his real name, but he left to go to a church which was closer to where he lived. He travelled quite some distance.

But he was a guy who always put other people first, always got in and helped clean up, always asked people questions and how they were going. And when he asked, his manner was sincere. You know, he'd look you in the eye, and you could tell he was genuine about it. He was a guy who'd lived out these qualities of true wisdom. But he came to me one day and said that he noticed that lots of people at our church studied at Ridley Bible College.

[12:30] And he didn't know that much about the Bible, and they did. And so he felt like he was not smart enough to be here at our church. And so I pointed out that God is not interested in smart people, but wise people.

People who fear God and live out his wisdom from above. And Brett may not have known his Bible as well as a couple others, but I tell you what, he was truly wise in God's eyes.

And that's what matters most. But James' readers, well, they weren't wise because they were not living by God's wisdom. Instead, they were living by their own selfish desires, which is false.

And this led to all sorts of problems. So we're at point 2, chapter 4, verse 1. He says, James has just said that their false wisdom leads to disorder and every evil practice.

Well, here it is. They're fighting, quarreling, and killing. Not literally, I think, but killing with their slanderous words, as we see in verse 11.

[13:48] In fact, just skip down to verse 11 for a moment. Let me show you there. He says, Brothers and sisters, Do not slander or speak evil against one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it.

And that is the law of loving your neighbor as yourself. And when you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one lawgiver and one judge, the one who's able to save and to destroy.

But you, who are you to judge your neighbor? In other words, they were speaking evil of one another, murdering one another, if you like, with their words, with their slander.

Jesus said something similar in the Sermon on the Mount. And we've already seen them do this in chapter 2, verse 4, where they were judging one another with evil thoughts, if you remember, and showing faulty favoritism.

Do you remember that? And in so doing, they were judging the law that says love your neighbor as yourself. They weren't doing that. They weren't loving.

[14:51] They were sitting in judgment on it and saying, well, I'm going to do what I like. I'm going to speak evil of them. I'm going to judge them. But then James reminds them, who do you think you are? There's only one lawgiver.

There's only one judge, God. Do you notice the warning there in verse 12? And then this God is the one who can both save and destroy. And so, here are James' readers.

They are following their own selfish desires, their own wisdom, and has led to fights, quarrels, and murderous words, breaking the law of love. And the incredible thing is that it's all happening in church.

You see the problem with such false wisdom? You see the problem with such envious and selfish desires? In fact, it's even consumed their prayer life, verse 3.

He's just said they don't get things because they don't ask God. But verse 3, when they do ask God, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

[15:55] There's that word again, hedonism, pleasures. Their selfishness prays with wrong motives so that they can spend on their desires.

In other words, they pray for money, for example, to spend on what they want rather than what they need. I was having dinner with some people recently and in the course of the conversation it came up that one of them, of the couple, had once had cancer.

And at that time, they said, I didn't pray for healing. I just prayed that God would draw me close and help me to trust Him. Now, healing is not a want, it's a need, so it's a good thing to pray for.

But there is something that we all need even more and that is to trust God and grow in our faith. That's what we need above all. And we saw that from James chapter 1 where trials help us to do that, help us to trust God and grow in our faith.

And this person that we're having dinner with said, and God kindly honoured that prayer and I did grow during that time. Now, she wasn't boasting or anything, it was more of a passing comment, but I thought, here is a truly wise person who is living by God's wisdom, you see.

[17:09] She does not have bitter envy at other people's good health, nor was she praying with selfish ambition, for she prayed not for what she wanted or even needed, but for what she needed most of all, continued trust in God.

That's wise living, you see. You can often tell where people are at with God by the way they pray and what they pray for. And for James' readers, what they were praying for shows that they're not in a good place.

In fact, they're actually cheating on God. Have a look at verse 4. James ramps it up and he says, you adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God? Or do you think scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?

Now, throughout this letter, James has been addressing his readers as my brothers and sisters. But in verse 4, how does he address them? You adulterous people.

[18:18] It's a pretty big slap in the face, isn't it? But that's because what they were doing was a pretty big slap in the face to God. You see, the Bible describes a Christian relationship with God like a marriage.

Because when we become a Christian, we enter into an exclusive relationship with God. He becomes our one and only God and we become his one and only people. And to borrow from the wedding vows, we are to forsake all others and serve and follow him alone.

What's more, to make us his people cost him greatly. My wedding to Michelle didn't cost me much money, actually. In fact, her parents paid for it, so it didn't cost me much at all.

But God's wedding to us, as it were, cost him his only son. Jesus died to pay for our sins so that we could be wedded to God as his people with all the blessings that come with that.

But it also means we are to forsake all other gods. And so when we follow the ways of the world instead of God's, when we follow our selfish desires instead of God's wisdom for life, it's like we commit adultery on God.

[19 : 29] That's what James is saying. One of the hardest things I've had to do as a pastor is help people deal with marriage breakdowns because of adultery. There is such hurt and anger and often understandably.

But you see, that's what we do to God when we follow the world's ways instead of his. And I wonder if we realise if our sin is that serious. I wonder if we realise how much it hurts God because it does grieve God.

Why? Because he loves us and he's jealous for us in a good way. You see, jealousy can be a good or bad thing. If we are jealous for something that is not exclusively ours, you know, like another person's money or whatever it is, job, then that's bad.

That's envy. jealousy. But if we are jealous for something that is meant to be exclusively ours, that's not meant to be shared like a spouse, then it's right kind of jealousy.

if I see a guy flirting with my wife, then that's not right. She's my wife and I'm her husband and so it's right for me to feel jealous for her. Well, it's the same with God.

[20 : 37] We are exclusively gods and when he sees us flirting, if you like, with the world's ways or the earthly wisdom, he's rightly jealous for us because he does not want to share us with another.

And when we do go off with another God or the world or our own selfish desires, then it hurts God. What's more, says James, if we persist in doing it, it will make us an enemy of God.

If we end up choosing the world over God, we become his enemies, the enemy of the God who can both save and destroy us. But James does not want to see his readers wander from God and be destroyed and that's why he's not pulling any punches and that's why he also gives us the solution to this false wisdom which brings us to point three and verse six.

He says, but God gives more grace. That is why scripture says God opposes the proud but literally gives grace to the humble.

Love verse six. No matter how much hurt we have caused, God gives more grace. Isn't that beautiful? Grace is God's great generosity that we don't deserve.

[21 : 49] It's his great generosity that saw him give his son for us and continues to see him give us forgiveness time and time again if we trust in Jesus.

It's as though James says in verse four, see how great your adulterous sin is and now verse six, see how much greater God's grace is. It's a great picture and if we don't think God's grace is all that amazing, then I wonder if it's because we've forgotten how offensive our sin is.

But do notice who God gives this grace to. It says God opposes the proud and gives grace, literally gives grace to the humble. And so the next part of the solution is to do just that, to humble ourselves before God.

How? Well, James tells us in verse seven to ten, he says, submit yourselves then to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.

Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.

[23 : 02] Here James shows us what it means to humble ourselves before God and it means to resist the devil's temptations and instead submit to God at verse seven. Notice, by the way, that James assumes we can resist the devil.

You know how people say that they do something bad and then they say, oh, the devil made me do it. You ever heard that expression before? Well, no, he didn't because you can resist him.

We are to resist temptation and submit to God. We are to flee from the devil to God, humbly accepting the word implanted in us, chapter one, verse 21. And it means to come near to God as well in repentance with the promise that he will come near to us in forgiveness.

It means to stop being double-minded, you know, trying to live a bit of God's way and a bit of the world's way and instead be single-minded for God. And it means to be sincerely, sorry, to grieve over our sin, realizing just how offensive it is to God.

Here at Holy Trinity we have a number of services, as you know, and the early morning service is the 7.45 a.m. service, not p.m., a.m. and I haven't seen many of you there, actually.

[24 : 14] I don't know what the problem is. But once a month at this 7.45 service we use the old Anglican prayer book that was written in 1662, so old school.

But there's this prayer of confession that I'm often struck by and I'm hoping it's on the slide. Here it is. Thomas Cramner wrote it and he said, We acknowledge and bewail our manifold, which means

lots, of sins and wickedness, which we, from time to time, have most grievously committed. We do earnestly repent and are heartily sorry for these, our misdoings. The remembrance of our sin is intolerable to us. Have mercy on us.

Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father. And on it goes. Here is a guy who understood how serious sin is, doesn't he?

He understood what it meant to humble himself before the Lord. But he also understood the good news of the gospel that God will lift us up.

[25 : 23] God will forgive. God will restore. Why? Because he always gives more grace. And tonight, it doesn't matter who you are.

It doesn't matter if you've been a Christian for a hundred years or if you're not even a Christian at the moment. The reality is every person in this room has cheated on God, whether as our creator who made us or our redeemer who saved us.

If you are not a Christian, you have still sinned against the creator who made you. And if you are a Christian, then we have sinned against the one who redeemed and saved us. We've all sinned one way or another by following our own evil desires instead of God's wisdom for our life.

And sin is serious as I hope you've seen. It's so serious that in verses 7 to 10, just four verses, James actually gives ten commands to deal with sin.

Submit, resist, come near, wash, purify, grieve, mourn, wail, change, and be humbled. Why is he so keen for us to do this? Because he wants to see you right with God.

[26 : 34] The God who can both save and destroy. So I'm going to do something a little different tonight. I'm going to close with a prayer of commitment or recommitment.

So on the next slide is a prayer. This is what it says. It says, Dear God, please forgive me for following my own selfish desires. Please forgive me for the sins and wickedness I have committed. Please forgive me for not realizing how much I have hurt you. Thank you for Jesus whose blood pays for all my sin. Thank you that you always give more grace.

Help me to resist the devil and submit to you as your child. And please help me to live more according to your wisdom, especially by being more dot, dot, dot.

And at that point, I want you to pick something from verse 17 and 18. Chapter 3, verse 17 and 18.

One of those qualities, they're actually on the slide if you want to look up there if you've closed your Bible.

[27 : 33] Pick one of those qualities and I want you to think about which one could I work on more and insert that when we get to that part of the prayer. Now, I'm going to pray this one line at a time and I just want you to echo it in your heart and mind to God just silently.

And I want to invite all of you to do that. And if you're not a Christian, then why not become a Christian tonight? There's no good reason I can think of for not becoming a Christian right now. So why don't you repeat in your heart and head to God this prayer and you too can be forgiven and become part of God's family with all the blessings that come with that.

So let me pray. Let's pray this prayer. So let's bow. dear God, please forgive me for following my own selfish desires.

Please forgive me for the sins and wickedness I have committed. Please forgive me for not realizing how much I have hurt you.

[28 : 46] Thank you for Jesus, whose blood pays for all my sin. Thank you that you always give more grace.

Help me to resist the devil and submit to you as your child. And please help me to live more according to your wisdom, especially by being more prayer.

Pray for that quality. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.