



Theme: Summer Wisdom
"Navigating Wisely"

Sermon preached by Laura Stoner, July 18-19, 2026, at Summit Church, Durango

Weekly Memory Verse:

**"But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says.
Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves." – James 1:22**

SLIDE Summer Wisdom: *Navigating Wisely*

Hello Summit Church! My name is Laura Stoner, and I am a pastoral intern here for the summer. My time here is part of my seminary education, and I am grateful to Pastor Jeff, the Summit staff, and the entire congregation for making this opportunity possible. I am entering my third and final year of seminary this Fall and hope to be in ministry in the Durango area sometime in the future. Thank you again for the warm welcome you have given me.

Today, we continue the Summer Wisdom series, exploring the wisdom in the Letter of James and the Proverbs of the Old Testament. The letter of James, is believed by most scholars to be written by James, the half-brother of Jesus. James would have grown up Jewish and, like Jesus, would have been knowledgeable about the Hebrew Bible. Throughout James' letter, you will find references not only to the Proverbs of the Hebrew bible, but also the book of Leviticus, for example. It is clear that in his letter, James linked his teaching to elements of the Hebrew Bible that his community would have found familiar.

In the letter of James, while we don't know a lot about the communities he

is writing to, it's safe to say he is writing to an early Christian community that is off course in several ways. So we are going to kick off our time together with this core question:

SLIDE When have you felt lost or off course in life?

Some of you may have come in today feeling a bit lost. If you don't think this applies to you, I can speak from experience when I say, there are times in our lives when we don't know we are lost. That was true for many in James' community, and I think it's true for many of us too.

Lucky for us, the letter of James is the perfect guide to get us back on track. It's full of guidance on how to be faithful to God. Some scholars liken all the bits of guidance in this letter to wisdom being strung together like a string of pearls.

The early church community to whom he wrote this were likely Jewish Christians outside of Israel. Just as in the Pauline letters, you get a sense of the issues they are struggling with by deducing them from the focus and examples in his teachings.

I spent a whole semester on the letter of James, so there is a lot I love about it, but I felt pretty called out by the remarks he makes to a group of sea merchants in chapter 4. He says:

BIBLE (Jas 4:13-17)

Look here, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit." How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, "If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that." Otherwise, you are boasting about your own pretentious plans, and all such boasting is evil. Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.

Tell us what you really think, James! Friends, before my shift into ministry, I spent years as a sales operations leader. James' reference to the merchants saying

“Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.” sounded like something coming straight out of every sales forecasting call I was ever a part of. This portion of James officially had my attention - what is the issue with this? I doubt the merchants were expecting this. I am sure you can appreciate it is one thing to know you are lost and off course; it's another thing entirely to **think** you are on the right track, then realize - **nope** - you are off course. What was at issue here?

Let's dig into the context to get a better understanding. In these verses, James is speaking to merchants in his community who would travel by sea on long, dangerous voyages.

Slide [Image of sea merchants]

These merchants had specialized knowledge. They could navigate long, treacherous waters and were knowledgeable about the needs and supply chain of the ancient world. They knew what would sell where and how to maximize profit. Sound familiar? These were men of the world and would have been in the upper middle class of the community. They were not quite in the elite class, but they were above the vast majority of people in James' community who lived at or below the poverty level.

Friends, the issue James is calling out here is not the mere act of doing business or making money. He is challenging the way these merchants talk about their plans, boasting as if they were masters of the universe, succeeding entirely on their own abilities. James speaks at length about taming the tongue elsewhere in his letter. You see, the boasting is problematic for James because it indicates that these merchants have lost sight of their dependence on God and the fact that every good gift comes from God. Earlier in his letter, he reminds them:

BIBLE (James 1:16-17)

So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow.

This is where the merchants have gone off course. It is arrogant to think that their achievements are solely their own, as if simply because it is their will, it will be so. This relates to what Pastor Jeff said last week about knowing our place in the created order - having reverence for God and recognizing everything God provides us each and every day. For James, boasting in this way led to straying further and further away from keeping God's will at the center of your lives. The merchants were so convinced by their own desires, abilities, and know-how that they lost sight of God's grace in their lives and their purpose as Children of God.

Friends, the danger in placing our own will at the center of our lives rather than God's will, is not a new idea - James would have known it from Proverbs. This was our memory verse a few weeks ago:

BIBLE (Proverbs 3:5-7)

Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take. Don't be impressed with your own wisdom. Instead, fear the Lord and turn away from evil.

When I tried to think of a classic example of someone impressed by their own wisdom (I didn't have to look any further than my newsfeed, honestly!). But, I decided instead to highlight a character from one of my family's favorite musicals, *Hello, Dolly!* The film version was released in 1969 and featured Walter Matthau and Barbra Streisand. The story is set in NY, in the 1890s. One of the main characters, played by Walter Matthau, is Horace Vandergelder, a successful merchant who owns a local Hay and Feed store. Boy, is Horace impressed with his own wisdom. He has worked hard and grown a successful business, but it has resulted in several other things as well. Let's take a look:

[Video clip from Hello Dolly]

Anyone else here 28 and three-quarters? Oh, I love Walter Matthau's portrayal of this character. In case you missed his remark to his head clerk about his achievement in life, he says, "Let me tell you something, son. I've worked hard, and I've become rich... and friendless and mean. And in America, that's about as far as you can go." Ugh. I don't know about you, but that sadly feels like a valid descriptor for the state of our country today, and this movie was set in the 1890s! Horace doesn't think he's lost either; he thinks he's arrived - he has made it to the top.

Horace's arrogance in this film is so thick, it's comical. Horace is so sure he is right, and everyone else is wrong. This warped belief has caused him to isolate and not invest in relationships. Until recently, he didn't think he needed anyone. Earlier in the film, he says, "Ninety percent of the people in this world are fools, and the rest of us are in danger of contamination." Thinking everyone else has to change is part of what keeps us lost as faithful followers of Christ. Much like the sea merchants in James' time, we can't even see that there is a problem. Horace had so many worldly validations of success that fed his belief that he was on the right track.

So this is the slippery slope, friends. It's easy to dismiss a movie character, but don't most of us walk around thinking we are right? Before this phase of my life, I don't think I would have ever admitted to being off course. I am a planner, after all. I have always been a high-achieving person. I've worked hard in school and in work. I had a successful career in high tech and plenty of external validations of success, and yet - something was missing.

I can look back now and see that while I was always active in my faith, it did not mean God was at the center of my life. My will, my desires, and what the world expected of me were at the center. Oh, I checked all the boxes, I attended church, volunteered, and tithed, but I had a very shallow awareness of God's grace in my life and no real connection to my true calling. Just like the merchants, I was lost and could not see my own unfaithfulness. Our apostle James has a few things to say about this way of navigating the world. He is asking us to consider:

SLIDE What is guiding your life?

In James' letter, he tells his community outright that they are deceiving themselves if they think it is enough to simply know the scriptures or say they have faith when it is not reflected in their actions or in how they live their lives. Friends, this is the core of James' message to his community, so I have chosen it as our memory verse for the week. Would you read it with me?

BIBLE (James 1:22)

**But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says.
Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.**

James calls us to be doers of the Word, and this is where his community, and ours, if we are honest, are falling down. It's easy to point at a character like Horace as a poster-child bad actor. However, there are a lot of behaviors that helped Horace arrive at his distorted sense of success that are still relevant and pretty pervasive among Christians today.

First, Horace clearly doesn't think he needs anyone, and, even when he considers the "foolish" idea of getting married, it is only because he has determined it is the best way for him to have a steady housekeeper! Ugh. His opening song, "It Takes a Woman," is all about the long list of things he needs a wife to do...like shovel the ice, set out traps for the mice, and help with leaky plumbing! Horace sees people as objects in a transaction - you can see it in how he abuses his workers in the film, too. He doesn't see the other people in his life as gifts from God. Going back to what Pastor Jeff said last week about our relationship with God affecting everything....if your relationship with God is strictly transactional, you will perpetuate that with others as well.

If we're honest, if we truly loved God and neighbor as we are called to, I don't think we would have the level of isolationism, polarization, and

dehumanization we see in our world today. We convince ourselves that so long as we are minding our own business and not overtly harming another person, we are good, right? Friends, this is not faithfulness either.

When God is guiding our steps, maintaining our interconnectedness with God, each other, and all of creation would be our priority. When our hearts belong to God, then we can recognize that it is not enough to focus solely on ourselves. God's plans for us are bigger than this. If we cannot see beyond ourselves, we are missing out on living into our purpose as Children of God. We are called to advance God's Kingdom here - now - together. It's hard to do this if we only spend 1 hour together each week. So maybe you are asking yourself:

SLIDE How do I change course?

Well, if you haven't picked up on it, the wisdom in the letter of James is all about helping us recognize when we are not being faithful to God and challenging us to be doers of the Word. So, what does this mean exactly? James tells us in Chapter 4:

BIBLE (James 4:6-8)

As the Scriptures say, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world.

Humility is a huge part of the equation, friends. You see, the humble recognize their dependency on God's grace and actively seek God's guidance in their life. The humble do not try to do everything on their own heroically - they ask for help, they work in community, they are accountable to their community. We are in a culture that rewards rugged individualism to the point of blinding us to the gifts our neighbors bring to the table. I assure you that we can learn a lot from our most vulnerable neighbors, both here and abroad. Just ask anyone who has come back from one of our mission trips. When we are so sure we are right, we don't

think we need anyone else's opinion, including God's.

Think about who the decision-makers are in our world today versus who Jesus told us would be first in the kingdom of heaven. Do you think the most vulnerable neighbors in our community have the same opinion we do? What priorities might families experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, violence, or displacement pursue? Our tendency to assume we are right is our own arrogance getting in our way.

It takes intentional work to keep love of God and neighbor at the center of our lives. We are surrounded by a world that would rather keep us distracted and blaming others before looking at ourselves. This is why the scriptures tell us, "Purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world." The reference to the world in this context does not refer to God's creation. It refers to the influences in our world that keep us focused on temporary, selfish ambitions and possessions rather than eternal ones. The world wants us to believe that we will find happiness in stuff, in experiences, in distractions, at a certain level of wealth, in certain people, or places. The world will tell us that our problems would be solved if certain neighbors didn't exist. The voice of this kind of self-centered world is not God's voice.

God wants us to look within for exactly what we need. We are equipped children of God who need to strip away all the armor we have built up that keeps us from loving our neighbors and being our true selves. It's the reason why Pastor Jeff tells us over and over we need to remember who we are and whose we are. To do this faithfully, we need to humbly walk with God in every aspect of our lives. So, how do we navigate to new life?

SLIDE Navigating to New Life

Friends, if following the radical message of the Gospel were easy, our world would be a very different place, wouldn't it? Even in the ancient world, early Christians struggled to see their own unfaithfulness. For many of us, we might

simply be too comfortable in our lives to recognize how we have gone off course. Our apostle James wants his community to stop deceiving themselves that knowledge of the Word is the same as living the Word. Why did James stress this so much? James sets our hearts on it early in his letter. He says:

BIBLE (James 1:12)

God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward, they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

[Slide Crown of Life Image]

The crown of life was a cultural reference to the olive-leaf crown that successful Olympians received in honor of their skill, courage, and triumph. It was the highest honor Olympians in the ancient world could receive. They did not receive medals like athletes today. The crowns were woven from wild olive trees on Mount Olympia.

For Christians, he is using it to represent victory in both the present and eternal life. A symbol of successfully navigating the trials and temptations in this life. But remember, friends, James is not asking his community to simply go through the motions and check the boxes - as if they could earn their ticket to eternal life. He is calling for them to be doers of the Word so they can advance God's Kingdom on earth and grow in holiness now.

God promises the crown of life **to those who love him**. James wants us to remain loyal to God rather than to the world, and to deepen our faith through action. You don't grow in holiness by withholding your time or your gifts. As Pastor Jeff has told us before, our gifts are meant to flow through us - that is how we advance God's Kingdom now. You just heard Pastor Wade preach on the sacramental quality of community - we don't grow in holiness by isolating ourselves, either - that is the path to spiritual death.

We are doers of the Word when we use our gifts to serve our community. We grow in holiness by living the Word even when it's hard. Friends, you are blessed to be part of a faith community with so many opportunities to grow in your faith. When was the last time you took a step toward growing in holiness? When was the last time you invited someone else to do the same?

Our Methodist tradition, founded by John Wesley, has always been a love-in-action denomination. John Wesley knew that serving your church and community was critical to deepening your faith. He referred to the incremental process of growing in faith as “Christian Perfection.” Don’t think of perfection in this context as an arrogant achievement, but rather as growing to be more Christ-like. “Wesley urged Christian believers on the way to Christian perfection to undertake both works of mercy and piety.

SLIDE “It is by patient continuance in well doing, in using all the grace which is already given you, that you are to seek the whole gift of God, the entire renewal of your soul, the full deliverance from sin.”¹ - John Wesley

Friends, we need to be honest - are you seeking the whole gift of God, the entire renewal of your soul now? Or are you feeling a little lost - going through the motions instead of seeking a deeper relationship with God? God is waiting for our faithful response. So friends, I ask you - where are you on the path?

I think it’s important for us to look back at what James said to the merchants who had their own plans:

BIBLE (James 4:14)

How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it’s here a little while, then it’s gone.

¹ Collins, Kenneth J.. The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace (p. 282). Kindle Edition.

Oh, those merchants who traveled by sea understood this reference. The morning fog is a mist that is here one moment and gone the next. Our lives are no different, friends. We are finite creatures, and our time on this earth is short. Don't waste it by staying spiritually stuck. Our Wesleyan tradition calls us to do all the good we can with the limited time we have.

I stand before you today as someone who was spiritually stuck and didn't know it. I think sometimes we are just too comfortable to be motivated to change, especially when the world rewards us for pursuing an empty path. It took life challenging me on all fronts, in order to move me into a new beginning. I had to face things happening to the people I love that I could not fix, no matter how hard I tried. Relying on my own wisdom failed me. I had to seek God's help in a way I never had before. I had to move past my check-the-boxes level of faith. For me, adopting contemplative prayer practices, studying the witness of the Saints and Christian Mystics, and devoting more time to the scriptures was life-changing. The truth of the Gospel message was undeniable. It led me to do the work to look within at all the ways **I needed to change**. As Jesus says in Matthew 7: "And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own?" It turns out this high achiever developed a pretty big log in her own eye that needed to be removed before I could help others. While this process was painful, it was also freeing. I experienced God's grace, healing, and peace in a way that I had never experienced before. I found a deeper spiritual life than I thought was possible, and I didn't get there alone. My church provided opportunities for me to lead and grow in ways that further opened my heart to the work of the Spirit, and I could no longer deny that God was calling me into a new life in ministry.

Friends, you don't have to be in full-time ministry to advance God's work in the world. Each of us has the capacity to grow in our faith now. Jesus enlisted his disciples exactly where they were - he did not wait until they had their act together. The Summit staff is available at the welcome center each week and can help you take your next step.

Friends, I had no idea there was so much more. I feel like I wasted so many

years in a very shallow level of faith. Let's be honest with ourselves - what are we walking toward? Are we walking towards new life? Or are you stuck, unsure where you are going? We are surrounded by a world that will lull us into inaction and indifference. My challenge to you is to reconnect to who you are called to be - **lean in** to Summit's mission to be Jesus Christ to the world. I pray that is your compass - it will lead you to the crown of life.

Would you whisper this prayer after me?

SLIDE Prayer

Jesus,

Help me to recognize when I am lost....

Open my eyes to see, and my ears hear your call...

Help me to humbly look within at the ways I need to change...

Help me grow in holiness...

Use me to do your will in the world and share the good news of light and love... In Jesus' name. Amen.

July 18-19 Order [To be Updated]

1. Countdown
2. Ryan welcomes people and invites them to stand in body or spirit. 3. Song – “I Thank God”
4. Song – “Wind of Love”
5. Jeff welcomes and shares:
 - A. QR Code
 - B. Invites people to greet each other
6. Announcement Video
7. Sermon Video Intro
8. Laura - Sermon
9. Laura - Prayer
10. Jeff - Offering
11. Jeff - Med Moments
12. Song – “Give Us Clean Hands”
13. Jeff - Prayer and Lord’s Prayer
14. Jeff - Care Ministers
15. Jeff - The Bridge
16. Jeff - Closing Prayer