

On NPR’s program *This American Life*, John Hodgman conducted an informal, unscientific survey asking the question: Which is better? The power of flight, or the power of invisibility?

Think about that question. Which would you choose. Would you rather be able to fly or be able to become invisible? And what would you do with your newfound powers? Would you be a superhero or super-selfish?

What John Hodgman found surprised him. No matter which power people chose, they used it in self-serving ways. Their plans weren’t often heroic. In fact, they were almost never even kind. Hodgman wondered why no one wanted to take down organized crime, bring hope to the hopeless, swear vengeance on the underworld. If only a little bit. Instead, Hodgman found that his interviewees concocted schemes that all relied on their new super powers to acquire things related to their personal desires.

Typically, it went something like this: People who can become invisible sneak into the movies, steal cashmere sweaters at exclusive department stores, spy on their coworkers, stalk their exes, hang around showers, eavesdrop on conversations about themselves or slip onto airplanes for free rides.

People who can fly stop taking the bus. They give up their cars. They check out the bar scene by flying in and around, hoping to gain some notoriety. They fly off to Paris, or Prague, or Rio.

One typical respondent, who had chosen flight, commented, “I don’t think I’d want to spend a lot of my time using my power for good. I mean, if I don’t have super strength and I’m not invulnerable it would be very dangerous to fly. If you had to rescue somebody from a burning building you might catch on fire. Just having the power of flight, I don’t think it’s necessarily quite enough because you don’t have super strength. I’d still be weak when I got there. I don’t fight crime now.” He finished with, “I’d go to Paris, I suppose. If I was a superhero, I guess I could be ‘Going to Paris Man.’”

Ahem. “Going to Paris Man” is not a superhero. But his answer is revealing. It might just be representative of the rest of us, if we’re honest. (from *Homiletics Online*)

This isn’t a surprise. It’s the wisdom of the world, and the apostle James warns us against such false wisdom. He says that the superpower we need is divine wisdom. James calls it “*wisdom that comes from heaven.*”

James says there is such a thing as false wisdom. It is characterized by “*bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts*” (3:14). It is “*earthly, unspiritual, demonic*” (3:15). “*For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice*” (3:16). This kind of false wisdom often results in conflicts, disputes and cravings.

Sometimes people in the church are that way. William Barclay once said: “There is a kind of person who is undoubtedly clever, with an acute brain and a skillful tongue. But his effect, nevertheless, in any committee, in any church, in any group is to cause trouble and to disturb personal relationships. It’s a sobering thing to remember that the wisdom that he possesses is devilish rather than divine.” (William Barclay, *The Letter of James*, p. 110)

James insists that we need divine wisdom instead of this devilish wisdom. In Psalm 111:10 we find these words, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...”*

The wisdom that the Bible speaks about doesn't focus on how much we know, but on what sort of person we are—the fruit we bear. Biblical wisdom is never mere speculative thought. Wisdom in the biblical tradition is always the wisdom that is thoroughly practical. James would say that you cannot teach the truth unless you live the life of a truthful person.

Theodore Roszak, writing in *The Making of a Counter-Culture*, says, “It is not of supreme importance that a human being should be a good scientist, a good administrator, a good expert. It's not of supreme importance that he (or she) should be right, rational, knowledgeable or even creative of brilliantly finished objects as often as possible. Life is not what we are in our various professional capacities, or in the practice of some special skill. What is of supreme importance is that each of us should become a person, a whole and integrated person...” He is exactly right in saying the thing that matters in life is the kind of person we become.

James says that true wisdom yields *“a harvest of righteousness.”* In other words, James is arguing that you can talk all you want about being wise, smart, powerful, but unless your life bears witness to good works, you're not really wise at all. James 3:13 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.”*

There's a big difference between smart and wise. When we think about wise, we often think of the phrase “wise old owl.” Owls are our classic symbols of wisdom. Perhaps it is their quiet ways, their wide-eyed stare or the fact that they can swivel their necks 180 degrees and so keep as sharp a lookout behind them as they can in front of them, that gives them this reputation for wisdom.

Crows, on the other hand, are known to be very smart birds. Like parrots, they can be taught to talk and can figure out complex logistical problems. However, crows are also compulsive collectors, a lot like us humans. They will fill their nests with odd bits of shiny metal, gleaming buttons, bright strings. Anything glitzy and gaudy that catches their eyes is dragged home.

In today's Scripture, James calls Christians to embody wisdom, which means we are to be the owls of this world. But too many of us have become crows. We are smart to the ways of the world, but stupidly suckered into any bright new idea, any slick gimmick that comes along.

Crows and owls represent the distinction between clever and wise. The same distinction holds true in humans as well. Let me show you what I mean.

Quickly, without over-thinking it, call up a mental image of someone who embodies the word “smart.” Now get a mental picture of someone who represents the word “wisdom.” I am guessing that your mind's eye didn't bring up two identical images to fit those two different words.

Typically, a smart person is dressed in an expensive, but conservatively styled, business suit. This smart person has all the traditional earmarks of power and success. They have money, a good job, a nice car, big house. This smart person looks both impressive and intimidating. Or perhaps your mind's eye drew a different picture. Perhaps you envisioned a young spelling bee champ with dark rimmed

glasses who can rattle off the exact spelling of a fourteen letter word that is used only by meteorologists .

But I'm guessing that the word "wisdom" brought an entirely different image to your mind. The impressive and intimidating person disappears, as does the young spelling bee champ. In their place is a face creased and worn, lined with a road map of wrinkles. Perhaps this person has white hair. Instead of the telltale marks of success, there is a suggestion of deep satisfaction. This person is characterized by peace and contentment.

Your own images may be quite different. But for all of us, being smart and being wise are two different things altogether.

The motto for our society could be stated this way: It is good to be smart. Our society values education, good grades, and important degrees. But James would respond, "It is smart to be good." The wise person lives a life that is good. Jesus said we should be "*wise as serpents and innocent as doves*" (Matthew 10:16). But how do we get this kind of wisdom?

James explains how we can access the true source of wisdom. Remember chapter 1 verse 5, "*If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.*" James says true wisdom is heaven-sent (3:15, 17). TRUE wisdom. It is "*pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere*" (3:17). It's the kind of wisdom that Jesus had.

The kind of wisdom reminiscent of what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13: "*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth*" (1 Cor. 13:4-6).

Jesus loved everyone with that kind of wisdom. In a remarkable verse in 1 Corinthians 1:24, Paul concludes a sentence with these words, "*...but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*" Did you catch that? Christ is "the wisdom of God." When we get wisdom from heaven, we will become more like him.

The truly wise person is one who prays to be just like Jesus. I've thought at times that we should pray to become *less like us* and *more like Jesus*. Jesus modeled a life filled with the wisdom of good works and great faith.

The Christian faith transforms a person's outlook on life. In place of rivalry, competition, and jealousy there is sincere love that yields peace, consideration for others, and a willingness to submit to God and others.

And the sincerity of our faith can be measured. If our faith is real, we will experience growth in the grace of the Lord as the "fruit" of that growth becomes more visible in our lives. What does that "fruit" look like?

James describes “the fruit of faith” this way: *“Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness, and in chapter 4 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”* (3:18 and 4:7-8).

So let’s be clear, my friends, the “wisdom from heaven” produces the “fruit of faith.”

May we become wise enough that the “fruit” of our faith is evident for all the world to see! Amen.