

On NPR’s program *This American Life*, John Hodgman once conducted an informal, unscientific survey asking the question: Which is better? The power of flight, or the power of invisibility? Think about that question for a moment and decide which you would 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 superpowers to acquire their personal wants.

Typically, it went something like this: People who turn invisible sneak into the movies, steal cashmere sweaters at fine 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 fly stop taking the bus; they give up their cars. They check out the bar scene by flying in and around, hoping to gain attention. 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 the 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 the ‘Going to Paris Man.’” “Going to Paris Man” is not a superhero. But his answer is telling. It might just be a representative reaction for all of us, if we’re honest (*Homiletics Online*, 8/18/03).

This isn’t a surprise. It’s the wisdom of the world, and the apostle James warns us against such false wisdom. He claims 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*” (v. 14). It is “*earthly, unspiritual, demonic*” (v. 15). And in verse 16 he goes on to say, “*For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*” This kind of false wisdom often results in conflicts, disputes and quarrels.

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. The book of Job says in chapter 28: “*The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom.*” In Psalm 111 we find these words, “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom....*” The wisdom that the Bible describes doesn’t focus on how much we know, but on what sort of person we are (repeat). 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’re committed to being a person of truth and sincerity.

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 they 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...” Roszak is exactly right in saying the thing that matters in life is the kind of person we are.

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, or powerful, but unless your life bears witness to good deeds, you’re not very wise. Verse 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 “wise old owl.” Owls are the 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 so they can 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 fairly 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 eye which they drag home.

In today's Scripture, James calls Christians to embody *wisdom*. That means we are to be the wise "owls" of this world. But too many of us behave more like crows, smart in the ways of the world, but stupidly suckered into any bright new idea, any slick gimmick that comes along. It's not a perfect analogy, but crows and owls represent the distinction between smart and wise. The same distinction holds true in humans as well. Let me show you what I mean.

Quickly, without really thinking about it, call up a mental image of someone who embodies the word "smart." Now get a mental picture of someone who flashes out the word "wisdom." I am guessing that your mind's eye didn't bring up two identical images to fit with those two different words.

Typically, the smart person is dressed in expensive, expertly styled, business clothing. This smart person has all the traditional earmarks of power and success. They have money, a good job, a new car, sharp clothes. This smart person looks both impressive and intimidating. Or perhaps your mind's eye drew a different picture. Perhaps you saw the classic image of a "geek," say, someone with glasses and a pocket-protector, like a research scientist.

But I am guessing that the word "wisdom" brought an entirely different character to your mind. The smart and savvy look is gone. In its place is a face creased and worn, lined with a road map of wrinkles. Perhaps this person has gray hair. Instead of the telltale marks of success, there is a suggestion of humility. This person is characterized by a sense of peace and contentment.

Your own images may be quite different. But for all of us, being smart and being wise are two very different things. Our society tends to value education, good grades, and intelligence. We like smart people. But James would counter, "It is smart to be good." And the wise person lives a life that is good. To use the language of James, the world may even say, "It is good to be wise." But James says, "It is wise to be good." And 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 comes "*from heaven*" (3:15, 17). This is true wisdom. It is characterized by purity, peacefulness, reasonableness, mercy, good fruits, impartiality, and sincerity (3:17). It is the kind of wisdom that Jesus had.

Jesus said “*Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves*” (Matthew 10:16, RSV). But how do we get that kind of wisdom blended with innocence? We get wisdom from heaven, as Christ came down from heaven. The truly wise person is one who prays and lives like Jesus. I’ve heard it said that we should pray to become *less* like us and *more* like Jesus. Jesus modeled the perfect kind of life, a life filled with the wisdom of good deeds, deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

That’s somewhat reminiscent of what Paul said in 1 Corinthians about love: “*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres*” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Jesus had that kind of love, and he had 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.*” Once again, the truly wise person is one who prays and lives like Jesus. We should pray to become less like us and more like Jesus because Jesus modeled the perfect life, a life filled with the wisdom of good deeds and humble faith.

A couple of lines that are somewhat hidden in this passage that really should not remain hidden are verses 7 and 8: “***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.***” Perhaps this is the real secret to wisdom. We need to resist the devil and stand firm against the temptations that come our way, in the same way that Jesus did. But don’t stop there. We are to come near to God and in all humility submit ourselves to God.

That is wise living, according to James. It’s a gift from God, what I would call “Wisdom and Grace for the Humble.” Amen.

(Thanks to Mickey Anders for sermon resources)