

Matthew 10:16-23

Introduction

We like to think that when we bring good news of salvation and deliverance and a kingdom of joy and peace to lost and miserable and hurting people, we will naturally be warmly received and embraced and welcomed. I think of the verse in Isaiah (52:7) that says “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news.” But we saw in our last study that there will always be those who will turn us away and refuse to listen to our words. No matter how miserable they might be and no matter how wonderful and obviously true the promise of salvation, they will stubbornly refuse to believe. That people will turn us away and refuse to listen to our words can be a hard blow – especially if we love the praise and approval of men more than the praise and approval of God. But Jesus says that for all those who refuse our message, a fate awaits *them* that will be even worse than the terrible fate that awaits Sodom and Gomorrah. They are guilty of the most abominable sin known to mankind – and that is the failure to *believe* in Jesus, whom God sent. So when we are turned away and rejected, we don’t sit down in a corner and cry and feel sorry for ourselves. Instead, we are compelled to earnestly warn of and proclaim the coming wrath and judgment of God. When we are rejected, we feel sorry *not* for ourselves, but only for those whose condemnation has just become more severe than it was before.

Now so far, these instructions in Matthew chapter ten have applied very specifically to the disciples’ *first* evangelistic journey – the one that they are just now about to embark on. In light of these instructions, the disciples can assume that on this initial tour, the worst they should expect is being turned away by those who refuse to believe their message. But now Jesus broadens His instructions to include a time in the not very distant future when things will be very different.

Verse 16a – Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.

On the one hand, we could say that Jesus isn’t speaking very clearly. He is using metaphor. On the other hand, we could say that Jesus couldn’t possibly have made Himself any more clear! Everyone knows what wolves do to sheep. They attack, and they tear, and they mangle, and they destroy, and they kill. The wolf is the hunter. The sheep are the vulnerable and helpless prey. And yet Jesus says that He is sending His disciples out *as sheep* in the midst of *wolves*. Now let me ask you a question: Are these wolves miserable, hurting, and helpless to save themselves? Yes! Do these wolves need to hear the good news of the kingdom and of God’s salvation? Yes! But when these miserable, and helpless, and hurting wolves hear the wonderful good news of God’s salvation preached to them, what will they do? They will attack those who brought the good news and seek to destroy them. Now we said before that compared with the warm reception we would like to think we could expect as bearers of good news, to be turned away and disbelieved can be a very hard blow. But now we’re not talking about being turned away and disbelieved. We’re talking about being attacked by wolves. We’re talking about persecution and suffering. And so in light of this coming reality, Jesus gives His disciples two pieces of advice – or we could say, two *commands*: “So be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

Verse 16b – “So be wise as serpents” (cf. verses 17-18)

There is another Greek word for “wise” and this is the word that *we* (in our English language) would more naturally use for “wisdom”. This word is “sophos”, or in another form, “sophia”. But the word that Jesus uses here is “phronimos”. This word can definitely be translated “wise”, but it can also have a more restricted or specialized meaning. So in Matthew 10:16 some translations use the word “shrewd” (NIV; NASB; NLT). One translation uses the word “clever” (NCV). Jesus uses this same word (phronimos) in Luke 16:8 and His parable of the dishonest manager: “The master commended the dishonest manager for his *shrewdness*. For the sons of this world are more *shrewd* in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.” But the most interesting (and perhaps surprising) thing about Jesus’ use of this word is how He qualifies it – “phronimos/shrewd *as serpents*”! *Nowhere* in the Bible is a serpent pictured as a positive thing (except perhaps Num. 21:8-9)! In the Bible, the serpent is universally a symbol of judgment, destruction, death, and even Satan Himself. In fact, when the Greek translators of the Old Testament came to Genesis 3:1, they translated it like this: “Now the serpent was more crafty/shrewd (phronimos) than any other beast of the field.” And this was the translation that Jesus and His disciples would have used! So when Jesus said that His followers were to be “phronimos as serpents”, they would immediately think of the original serpent in the Garden of Eden.

Now of course, Jesus is not calling us to be crafty, and wily, and sneaky, and deceptive. But it does seem clear to me that Jesus is calling us to something more specific than simply being wise. He is calling us to be shrewd and clever in a godly way as we proclaim the gospel in the world. We might think of being street-savvy or street-smart, or of being “calculating” in a good sense. Or we could also think of words like “cautious”, “guarded”, and “wary”. These are certainly words that would be especially appropriate for serpents. Jesus Himself gives us one example of what He means by “shrewd as serpents” in verses 17-18.

Verses 17-18 – Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.

“Be shrewd as serpents... beware of men.” Don’t go out and conduct yourselves in such a way that no one would ever know that I warned you about what men will do to you. You may be sheep among wolves, but you are not to be naïve and gullible. As one commentator says, “The first wisdom of serpents is simply the prudent realization that they *are* amid wolves” (Bruner). And yet there are many Christians and churches who seem completely unaware of this reality! Of course we would like to believe that we live among friends and that we are surrounded by good people. But this is to be naïve and gullible! At best, many Christians are very prone to “overestimate the benevolence of [the] wolves” (Bruner). But if we are to be wise as serpents, we have to come to grips with the fact that Jesus Himself said that He was sending us out as sheep to live among wolves, *and* that the wolves harbor *no* kind intentions toward us.

The second thing we see is that if we are to be shrewd as serpents, we will certainly not go out looking for trouble. It is not a noble thing to court arrest and imprisonment – or even persecution of any kind. In the early church, there were many who *actively pursued* martyrdom as the

ultimate sacrificial act of service to God. These people were sincere, but this was still an extreme example of failing to be shrewd as serpents. Now *why* does Jesus call us to be shrewd as serpents in our witness and evangelism? I believe the reason is not so much *our* welfare (though Jesus certainly cares about us), but especially the “welfare” of the Gospel. As a general rule, the disciples can be much more effective in their work when they are free to move about than when they are in prison! The disciples can be much more effective in the work of evangelism when they are alive than when they are dead! On the one hand, imprisonment and death are never things to be avoided at all costs. When the disciples were commanded by the religious authorities not to teach in Jesus’ name, they boldly responded: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 4:19-20; 5:28-29) and then they rejoiced that “they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:41). Jesus says: “*You will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.*” God can use imprisonment and even death for the greater good of the Gospel (cf. Phil. 1:12-14; the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church), but again, we are to leave these things to God. Here are some practical biblical examples of being shrewd as serpents:

- ✓ Acts 23:6-7 – Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.” And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.
- ✓ Acts 14:19-20 (cf. Acts 9:23-25) – But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city.
- ✓ John 2:23-25 – Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.
- ✓ John 7:1, 6-10 – After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill him. Jesus said to [His brothers], “You go up to the feast. I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come.” After saying this, he remained in Galilee. But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private.
- ✓ Matthew 7:6 – Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.
- ✓ Acts 16:36-39 – The jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, “The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace.” But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.” The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.
 - “Paul was concerned for the public reputation of his gospel message and also, no doubt, for the good standing of the church that was being established at Philippi. Thus he insisted on public vindication lest the people of Philippi continue to believe that he was a troublemaker and a lawbreaker, ideas that would have presented barriers to the

gospel in Philippi for years to come. Paul wanted to make it clear that a mistake had been made. Christianity is no threat to Rome” (ESV Study Bible).

In every one of these instances, the *goal* of being shrewd as serpents is always the advancement and spread of the Gospel. And again, why is it necessary to be shrewd as serpents in our proclamation of the Gospel? Because we live in a world that is *hostile* to us and to the message of Jesus Christ. Knowing this – knowing that the world will always be looking for even the slightest reason to accuse us and malign us and hinder the spread of the Gospel – we must be wary, and clever, and shrewd *for the sake of the Gospel and lost souls*. If at all possible, we must give the enemy no occasion for slander (1 Tim. 5:14) – even over otherwise “neutral” reasons. As Christians, we must constantly be on guard against the wolves. Hendriksen says that we should watch out for men’s evil intentions. We must not naively entrust ourselves to men, we must not without very good cause make them angry (cf. Rom. 12:18), and we must not fall into the traps of their catch-questions, but pray for grace to give them the appropriate answer. There are certain Christians that we may occasionally see in the headlines who are saying true things – and maybe even sincerely – but they are not being very shrewd. And as a result, the Gospel is unnecessarily subjected to public slander and scorn. It is not enough to be sincere, we must also be shrewd. It is not enough to be honest, we must also be clever. It is not enough to be bold, we must also be wary. It is not enough to be in earnest, we must also be calculating.

“The serpent is here viewed as the very embodiment of intellectual acumen or shrewdness... [This shrewdness] involves *insight* into the nature of one’s surroundings, both personal and material, *circumspection*, *sanctified common sense*, *wisdom* to do the right thing at the right time and place and in the right manner, a serious attempt always to discover the best means to achieve the highest goal, an earnest and honest search for an answer to such questions as: ‘How will this word or this action of mine look “in the end”?’ ‘How will it affect my own future, that of my neighbor, God’s glory?’ ‘Is this the best way to handle the problem or is there a better way?’” (Hendriksen)

And again, all of these things become especially important when we remember that we have been sent out as sheep in the midst of wolves. *Beware of men...* be shrewd as serpents – **for the sake of the Gospel**. We’ve all heard the phrase, “the end justifies the means”, and I hope we all know that is not true! But sometimes it *is* true that the end *requires* or *demands* the means. In this case, the spread and advancement of the Gospel is of such absolute and paramount importance that this “end” literally *demands* that we be shrewd – and not *just* shrewd, but shrewd *as serpents!*

- ✓ Philippians 1:15-18 – Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry... not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.
- ✓ 1 Corinthians 9:20-23 – To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law... that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law... that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel.

In all the world, there is no *end* more worthy than the advancement and spread of the Gospel, and *we* have been sent out with the proclamation of this Gospel. But we have been sent out with this Gospel as *sheep* in the midst of *wolves*. Therefore, we must be shrewd as serpents. We must always be calculating as to what will truly be in the best interests of the Gospel. We must always be asking ourselves: How will the Gospel fare if I say this or do that? How will the Gospel fare if I *don't* say this or do that? That is the standard. That is the measure. That is the one end that demands all possible and legitimate means, and to which we must apply all of our intellectual powers of wisdom and common sense. When it comes to the proclamation and spread of the Gospel *in a hostile world*, we need to be *smart* – to the glory of God.

Verse 16c – So be wise as serpents *and innocent as doves* (cf. verses 19-20)

After spending so much time on the meaning and importance of being “wise as serpents”, being innocent as doves is a very startling contrast! The Greek word for “innocent” literally means “unmixed”, and so it refers to that which is pure and sincere, or without double motives. One man says it is an “‘innocent harmlessness’ as opposed to deceit and cunning” (Kittel). So our shrewdness must always be sincere. Our cleverness must always be without deceit. “Innocent” can refer very generally to holy and righteous living (cf. Phil. 2:15), but once again the context demands a more specialized meaning. The point is not just blamelessness, but an innocent *harmlessness*. We may be shrewd as serpents, but we are always harmless as doves (cf. NLT; NKJV; ASV). And now the contrast is *most* stark. Think about the wily, cunning, and cautious ways of the serpent. And now think about the dove! Calvin writes: “Doves... though naturally timid, and liable to innumerable attacks, fly in their simplicity, imagine themselves safe till they are struck, and in most cases place themselves within the reach of the fowler’s snares.”

✓ Hosea 7:11 – Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense.

Obviously, the point is not that we ought to be stupid and witless. The point is that we are to be just as harmless *as if we were* stupid and witless doves. And this harmlessness implies and brings with it a very real vulnerability.

✓ Psalm 74:19 – Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild beasts.

What is it about doves that throughout history has made them a picture of innocence and purity? Why the dove, and not wolves and serpents – or even a horse, or an eagle, or an owl, or a lion? Doves strike us as pure and innocent precisely because of their absolute harmlessness, their complete and total vulnerability, and their rather naïve simplicity (cf. YLT). Shrewd – and yet vulnerably sincere. Clever – and yet harmless. Wary – and yet having a simple trust in God. Once again, Jesus Himself gives us one example of what He means by “innocent as doves” – this time in verses 19-20.

Verses 19-20 – When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

What a wonderful comfort! If Jesus had *only* told us to be shrewd as serpents, then when cornered by the wolves we would be paralyzed with the fear that our answers would not be shrewd enough, our words not eloquent enough, and our knowledge not sufficient. If Jesus had *only* told us to be shrewd as serpents, then when cornered by the wolves we would be terrified and seek to lash out, or else cower in silence.¹ But Jesus didn't just tell us to be shrewd as serpents. *Thankfully*, He also told us to be innocent as doves. My guess is that many of us never thought that the call to be "innocent as doves" could be so very *comforting*. To be innocent as doves is a reminder that we have no pretense. We have nothing to hide, and nothing to invent. To be innocent as doves is to have a simple (dove-like) trust in God, knowing that He will give us the words to say by His Spirit that indwells us (cf. John 14:26). "Christ forbids the disciples to look at their own strength, and enjoins them to rely, with undivided confidence, on heavenly grace. 'It is not,' he says, 'your ability that is in question, but the power of the Holy Spirit, who forms and guides the tongues of believers to a sincere confession of their faith'" (Calvin). Even one so shrewd and intellectually gifted as the Apostle Paul could write the following words:

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 – And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.
- ✓ 2 Timothy 4:16-17 – At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me... But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed.
- ✓ Ephesians 6:18-19 – Keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel.

While on the one hand there was never anyone so wary, and clever, and intellectually gifted as the Apostle Paul, we can say at the same time that there was never anyone so harmless, so vulnerable, and so simple as the Apostle Paul – excepting, that is, Jesus Himself.

Conclusion

"By itself, shrewdness produces evil and innocence results in gullibility. But *together* shrewdness and innocence produce the spirit which enables Christians to successfully storm the citadels of sin" (paraphrase of Hobbs; quoted in Blomberg). And so the words of Jesus to His first disciples apply equally to us *today*. Jesus says to me and to you: *Behold*, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves (don't forget that!), *so* be shrewd as serpents (beware of men), and innocent as doves (do not be anxious).

¹ "So long as men indulge in conjecture what is to take place, or whether this or the other thing will happen, and do not rely on the providence of God, they are kept in a wretched state of trouble and uneasiness" (Calvin).

Teaching our Children

- Q. Fill in the blanks: Jesus said that He was sending His disciples out as _____ in the midst of _____.
- A. Sheep / wolves
- ✓ Discuss this vivid picture. Talk about the relationship between Christians and the world. Talk about how the disciples might feel – especially in light of the fact that they have been sent out with a message of good news!
- Q. Since Jesus is sending His disciples out as sheep in the midst of wolves, He gives them two commands. What are they? (Hint: Jesus tells the disciples that they are to be like two animals)
- A. The disciples are to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.
- Q. What does Jesus mean when He says that we are to be wise as serpents? How are serpents “wise”?
- A. Serpents are cautious and wary, clever and shrewd (cf. Genesis 3:1 – crafty).
- Q. As followers of Jesus, we are to be a witness and a testimony to the world. How should we be cautious, wary, clever, and shrewd in our witness and testimony?
- A. ~ We should remember first of all that there are wolves out there and that the world will hate us. We would like to think that the world will be kind to us. But ultimately, this can never be true.
- ~ As much as is possible, we should try to avoid trouble with the world. This will usually leave us more free to witness and testify about Jesus.
- ~ See the Biblical examples under III. C.
- ~ For older children, reflect on the quote from Hendriksen under III. E. (This quote will also be very helpful for parents to read as they teach their younger children)
- Q. What does Jesus mean when He says that we are to be innocent as doves? How are doves “innocent”?
- A. Doves seem innocent and pure because they are so harmless, so helpless and vulnerable, and so “simple”.
- ✓ Spend some time describing a Christian who is both like the serpent *and* like the dove.
- Shrewd, but yet vulnerable and sincere
 - Clever, but yet harmless and without any deceit
 - Wary and cautious, yet having a simple trust in God
- Q. Jesus gives one example of how we should be innocent as doves when we have been cornered by the wolves. What example does Jesus give? (Hint: We are not to worry or be anxious)
- A. ~ Do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.
- ~ Here is a simple (dove-like) trust in God versus a reliance on one’s own wisdom (Reflect on the Scriptures under V. B.).

*Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves (don’t forget that!)
So be shrewd as serpents (beware of men), and innocent as doves (do not be anxious).*