

WISE AS SERPENTS – HARMLESS AS DOVES

Christ, in Matthew 10:16-23, outlines that until His Second Coming, His followers going forth with His message can expect hostile resistance and persecution. This is not all fun and games. We live in a largely Christ-rejecting world that is under the sway of Satan, and the result is that God's people will face consistent persecution and abuse.

If Christ were evaluated on giving a motivational speech (according to human standards), He would be given a failing grade. This is not what we naturally want to hear. "Please sign on for persecution and abuse," and yet that is what Christ informs His people they are going to continually face in this rebel world of hostility. Just remember what they did to Jesus; we can expect they will do to us, and just remember the disciple is not above his Master (cf. John 15:18-20).

Jesus warns and instructs His apostles, and by extension all those who will become His followers down through the ages – all the way down to the Second Coming. There will be no lasting tranquil conditions for God's people until the setting up of the kingdom. We (as it were) are behind the lines in enemy territory

Matthew 10:16 (NKJV)

16 "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

"I" is in the emphatic position. Christ is the One doing this. He is the one sending the apostles out as sheep in the midst of wolves. That is as dangerous a position as one can imagine! This is anything but safe! Christianity is not physically safe. It is the only spiritually safe position, but not physically.

Sheep are essentially defenseless creatures. And when it comes to sheep, wolves are vicious predators (cf. 7:15; Lk. 10:3; Jn. 10:12; Acts 20:29). They tear sheep up and devour them, and the sheep are powerless to stop them. That is why sheep need the protection of a shepherd.

The context into which Christ is sending His people is fraught with peril. Therefore, He says, "be wise as serpents and harmless as doves." Christ didn't say just assume a "martyr's complex". No, rather He in effect said be smart about it and yet cause no trouble.

Serpents are said to be wise in the sense of being shrewd or prudent in their ability to avoid danger. Serpents are wise (meaning shrewd or clever)

in the sense that they are subtle, quiet, and difficult to trap (cf. Gen. 3:1). They shrewdly have ways of escaping from threatening situations (cf. Matt. 3:7).

God's people are not to be naïve. We are to use our heads. Wisely avoid trouble if possible and yet do it in an ethical way that does no harm. We are not to be like a bull in a China closet, but rather like harmless doves (cf. Rom. 16:19; Phil. 2:15). We are not to respond to persecution with violence, but rather with finesse, tact, and wisdom.

Interestingly enough, Jesus here emphasizes human responsibility. God could just sovereignly protect His people, but here human responsibility is emphasized.

There is a beautiful balance here. Prudence can easily turn into fleshy manipulation, and innocence can easily turn into ignorance. But prudence balanced with innocence is just the right response. We want to be smart but not naive. We want to be harmless but not stupid.

Matthew 10:17 (NKJV)

17 But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues.

In view here is religious persecution. Jesus said to **WATCH OUT** for this. He is giving them a “**heads up**” so that when it happens, they will not be taken off guard. The “councils” were local courts run by the Jews in the context of the synagogue. For serious crimes in Israel the judgment was a beating called a scourging or flogging.

The Law in Deuteronomy 25:2-3 allowed for a wicked man to be beaten with 40 blows. The Jews not wanting to violate the law always stopped just one stripe short at 39 just to be safe. It was a brutal form of inflicting punishment which was very painful (cf. Mt. 23:34; Mk. 13:9; Acts 22:19; 26:11; 2 Cor. 11:24-25).

2 Corinthians 11:24 (NKJV)

24 From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one.

Jesus did not want the disciples to have any misconceptions about the environment they were being sent to minister in. It would not be a friendly environment. They were to expect a hostile response.

Jesus said...

John 15:19 (NKJV)

19 If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.