**Wise as Serpents and Harmless as Doves**

*Matthew 10:16*

**Introduction**

1. The Lord has entrusted each of His disciples with the greatest mission the world has ever seen – to seek and save the lost with the gospel (**cf. Luke 19:10**).
2. This incredible message will transform the lives of some but will be met with great opposition from others.
3. We must understand the great weight of our responsibility and move forward with the truth in a way that is beneficial to those we minister to, as well as in a way that provides for our own physical and spiritual safety that will allow us to continue the work.
4. Jesus gives a figure for instruction – **Matthew 10:16**
5. A Paradox of Proclamation and Perception
6. A Noble Mission
   1. Jesus began His ministry in **Matthew 4**:
      1. Baptism, temptations, preaching the gospel (**Matthew 4:23**), sermon on the mount.
      2. Healings/miracles, calling of disciples that follow Him.
      3. **Matthew 9:11-13** – came to help those in need, heal sick, spiritually.
      4. **Matthew 9:14-15** – positive time to rejoice – Messiah is here.
      5. **Matthew 9:35-38** – compassion of Jesus motivates prayer for laborers for the work (this would begin the involvement of the disciples in Jesus’ ministry).
   2. Power given and called apostles – **Matthew 10:1-2** – Jesus had been healing and preaching the good news, and now they would as His representatives (*apostolos* – an ambassador of Christ).
   3. Their mission:
      1. Preach the kingdom to Israel – **Matthew 10:5-7** – the long-anticipated kingdom is finally near! (Repent)
      2. Heal – **Matthew 10:8** – freely – monetarily, and in attitude toward others.
      3. Confidence of provision, some positive response – **Matthew 10:9-10**
7. Good News Received as Bad News
   1. **Matthew 10:11-15** – responsibility to discern who is “worthy” based on their reception of the gospel.
      1. **(vv. 11-13)** – ***“search out” (ASV), “find out” (ESV)*** who is worthy – i.e. who is receptive to the message? Stay with them.
         1. Implication that some will show themselves unworthy by their rejection.
         2. Who would reject this? The kingdom – healing, etc.
      2. **(vv. 14-15)** – some would utterly reject and procure an estimation by God as no better than Sodom and Gomorrah.
   2. **Matthew 10:16-26** – graphic and powerful language describing just how bad the rejection will get – sheep among wolves, torture, prison, family, hatred, defamation, persecution.
   3. **Such a negative reaction to such a positive message goes against all our intuition and expectation. But this is the gospel – 2 Corinthians 2:14-16 – same fragrance, different reaction.**
8. The Security of Our Sender
9. “Behold, I am sending you”
   1. **Matthew 10:16** – ***“Behold, I am sending you”***
   2. Jesus uses a specific verb that is the root of *apostolos* – *apostellō* – “send forth, send out; in relation to a sender send with a commission, send with authority, send for a purpose” (ALGNT)
      1. **Matthew 10:40** – ***“sent”*** – same word used concerning God sending Jesus – connection – you, Me, Him who sent Me.
      2. **Matthew 11:10** – ***“send”*** – used of the Divine messenger of **Isaiah 40**, John.
      3. **Inherent within the word is identity with the one who sends – intimate association – I.E. THEY ARE SENT, BUT NOT ALONE.**
10. Fearless Fellowship
    1. The result of being sent by Jesus and doing HIS will is boldness, and fearlessness knowing He is with you.
    2. For His sake – **Matthew 10:18, 22, 24-25**
    3. Confession – **Matthew 10:32-33** – of Him, and by Him.
11. **The importance of the mission, and the reality of our stewardship shows our great responsibility. However, in addition there is the added weight of opposition, and how we might handle that for our own safety (physically and spiritually), as well as to provide for the greatest success of the gospel. This is a balance which takes God’s grace to strike, and Jesus provides instruction in a figure to guide us.**
12. A Representation of Our Responsibility
13. ***“Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”***
    1. Reason – **Matthew 10:16a** – the danger of wolves.
    2. Wise as serpents:
       1. **Wise** – *phronimos* – “prudent, sensible, practically wise,” (VINE); “(1) intelligent, wise (2) prudent, i.e. mindful of one's interests” (THAYER); “thoughtful, i.e. sagacious or discreet (implying a cautious character; while *sophos* denotes practical skill or acumen; and *synetos* indicates rather intelligence or mental acquirement)” (STRONG)
          1. “Denoting prudence with regard to their own safety.” (VINCENT)
          2. **Matthew 7:24** – ***“wise”*** – building house on rock in anticipation of eventual storms.
          3. **Parable of wise virgins** – **Matthew 25:1-13** – ***“wise”*** – preparedness for the unknown time of the Bridegroom’s return.
          4. **Parable of Unjust Steward** – **Luke 16:1-13** – ***“shrewd”*** – steward took action to provide for his future knowing he was being fired (dishonesty, unrighteousness, but prudence) – (**v. 8** – commended for shrewdness)
          5. LXX – **Genesis 3:1** – of the serpent – ***“cunning,” “sagacious” (NETS)***
       2. Serpents are associated with intellectual acumen, shrewdness, cautiousness, wariness, and keenness.
          1. Typically negative, but something to be admired and considered if harnessed with righteous purpose.
       3. Thoughtful, cautious, prudent – regarding future outcome, discerning, pragmatic.
    3. Harmless as doves
       1. **Harmless** – *akeraios* – “pure, unmixed, as wine, uncontaminated; in the NT only figuratively, of a character marked by integrity and freedom from the influence of evil pure, sincere, uncorrupted” (ALGNT)
          1. This counters the negative connotation that comes with serpents.
          2. Wise – something we are; Harmless – something we aren’t.
          3. Be like a serpent without the negative baggage – be as innocent as a dove.
             1. **“They were to imitate the serpent's *wariness*, but not his *wiliness*.” (VINCENT)**
       2. Doves – “The pigeon which, from the viewpoint of natural science in ancient times, has no bile, was for the early Christians the symbol of all kinds of virtues” (BDAG) – namely, purity.
    4. “Join prudence and innocence together, rendering yourselves remarkable for integrity amidst the greatest temptations, and for meekness under the greatest provocations.” (Macknight, James, *Harmony of the Four Gospels Vol. 2*, 8)
14. Cautious but not Concealed
    1. The secular, pagan, immoral environment we live in must not deter us from sharing the gospel – **Romans 1:16**
       1. They will think it foolish and strange – **1 Corinthians 1:18; 1 Peter 4:4**
       2. They will persecute us – **Matthew 10:22** – they hate you because they hated Him.
       3. We should rejoice in this – **1 Peter 4:12-13**
    2. However, though we’re to be unashamed, bold, vocal, and positive about persecution, Christ says be cautious to avoid it if possible – **Matthew 10:16**
       1. **Paul** – **Acts 25:2-3, 9-12** – should he have gone knowing he would be killed? Was this cowardly? Was this appeal not part of the reason he’d be able to carry on his ministry?
       2. **Trusting, not testing** – **Matthew 4:5-7**
    3. But this is never at the expense of truth – **Matthew 10:27-33** – shout it from the rooftops, know God cares for you, confess Christ.
    4. **Some who profess to be Christians take pride in bringing as much difficulty on them that they can – they go out of their way to seek conflict – this is foolish, and counterproductive.**
15. Prudent but not Prideful
    1. A misunderstanding – **Matthew 10:19-20** – this is specific to these chosen apostles, to be inspired by the Spirit.
       1. This does not warrant spontaneity in the sense of unpreparedness, and pure improvisation.
       2. The gospel must be handled with care and wielded with precision.
    2. Called to prudence and preparedness:
       1. **Ephesians 6:15** – preparation is the key word.
       2. **1 Peter 3:15** – ***“always be ready”***
       3. **Colossians 4:5-6** – intentional with our time and speech, thoughtful – “know how…to answer each one.”
    3. Prudence demands an awareness of the audience:
       1. Paul among the Jews – **Acts 13:16-23** – starting with known and beloved history and introducing Jesus.
       2. Paul among the Athenians – **Acts 17:22-29** – starting with what they’ve observed, but building from it logically, showing their mistaken notions.
       3. **The argumentation and persuasion for one is going to be slightly different than for the other, though the same gospel is being preached.**
          1. Carefully crafting the way we say something, and the way we handle the truth (**cf. 2 Timothy 2:15**).
             1. *If I say it this way, how will they respond?*
             2. *If I point this out now, are they set up to receive it now, or should I lay a foundation first?*
          2. **However, though we are METHODICAL in how we approach presenting the gospel, we are never to be MANIPULATIVE (of the text or the person).**
    4. In the intelligence gathering, discernment, and planning we must never make the mistake of considering ourselves to be the power – **1 Corinthians 2:1-5**
    5. **It is contrary to the way of Christ to walk about unprepared, but with the willingness to “wing it.” It is contrary to the way of Christ to be rigid in our approach to presenting truth, unwilling to present it in the most effective way possible given differing people and situations. However, we must never act with the notion that we are in control, and the effectiveness is within our ability.**
16. Optimistic but not Oblivious
    1. Paul was not ashamed – **Romans 1:16** – in the sense of defeat, disappointment, and misplaced trust – **Romans 9:33**
       1. I.e. he was ready to preach in Rome with FULL CONFIDENCE that the gospel would be successful there.
       2. **Isaiah 55:10-13** – God’s word accomplishes what it is sent to do.
    2. We should not share the gospel in pessimism, but in expectation – **Acts 26:24-29** – ***“I KNOW THAT YOU DO BELIEVE”***
       1. Paul’s positive mindset – **Hebrews 6:9; Philemon 21**
       2. Jesus to Paul – **Acts 18:9-11** – I have many people…
    3. **When we preach the gospel to someone and they obey it, and walk in the light faithfully, should we be surprised? GOD IS ABLE!**
    4. Yet, Jesus does not want us to be oblivious – **Matthew 10:11-15**
       1. **Matthew 7:6** – not continuing to give the gospel treasure to one who continues to obstinately despise it.
       2. **Is there a time when we should “move on”? YES!** – What if they stayed in a city they knew was stubbornly opposed to the truth? – neglect of other cities, neglect/harm of self – physically, spiritually/influence.
    5. **If we seek to preach the gospel pessimistically, we are failing before we even start. We should expect the power of God’s word to work wonders. However, when the gospel meets a hard heart we HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY to discern when to shake the dust off and go to the next soul in need – otherwise we are spinning our wheels, and digging a trench we ourselves have to climb out of.**
17. Compatible but not Compromising
    1. Jesus did not tell the apostles to be revolutionaries and challenge the culture or status quo for the mere sake of being abrasive. He said to preach the gospel to everyone (**cf. Mark 16:15**) – this would expose great differences without us going out of our way to create them.
    2. Paul adapted whenever he could without compromising the gospel of Christ in his preaching, or his living – **1 Corinthians 9:19-23**
       1. **(v. 21)** – this requires us to know the truth well enough to discern what is non-negotiable, and what we can change.
       2. **1 Corinthians 10:23-24** – when considering these liberties where we may become compatible to another, our discernment must be sharp so as to always provide what is helpful, and not what could hinder another.
          1. Paul with Timothy vs with Titus – **Acts 16:1-5; Galatians 1:3-5**
    3. Part of the living sacrifice is the willingness to alter our own freedoms in sacrifice to Christ’s will when interacting with others – **Romans 12:1-2; 14:1-4**
    4. Yet, this aim to become compatible with those we seek to teach the truth must be limited to the scope of the gospel allowance – **cf. 1 Peter 4:3** – EX: a social drink is not justified to make someone comfortable and receptive to the truth.
    5. **We must be adaptable and seek compatibility and commonality when we can lest we hinder the gospel that is designed for all men to receive. However, the minute that truth is altered or forsaken is the minute we’ve forgotten our whole mission.**

**Conclusion**

1. We have been entrusted with a treasure that is immeasurable in value.
2. Yet, it is a treasure that not only appears as trash to some, but offensive and threatening.
3. We must work hard to strike the balance of being eager to spread the truth, understanding of when to move on, and always making sure we provide for the success of the truth, and in no way hinder its work.