

## Shrewd as Snakes; Innocent as Doves

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Peter Jonker

Matthew 10:16-20

Matthew 10 represents Jesus' mission instructions to the church. In context, Jesus is speaking the words of chapter ten to the disciples before they head out on a mission journey, but obviously Matthew means for these words to apply to more than the original 12, he means for them to be heard by us as instructions for our lives. These are instructions for our mission. Just as the disciples we are sent out into the world, we are sent to represent Christ in the world and bring his peace in all areas of life. These are our instructions. These are our marching orders.

I would like to focus tonight specifically on verse 16 of our passage. Because it has a compelling way of summarizing our task. "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." There are no less than 4 animal images in that passage. It is a veritable barnyard of biblical truth. As we unpack these images we will hear this verse tell us two things: First, it tells us about the environment of our mission, the circumstances under which we work. And second, it tells us about the mode of our mission, how we do our work. So, the environment, the context of mission, and then mode or character of that mission. I'd like to talk about both of these tonight.

First the environment. Jesus says, "Behold I am sending you out like sheep among wolves." Perhaps the best way to understand what Jesus is saying about the environment of our mission here is to understand what he is not saying. There are two things that Jesus did not say.

One thing Jesus did not say, *"Behold I am sending you out like sheep among wolves, so be careful! Stay as far away from those wolves as possible!!"* Jesus did not say, *"Find a nice safe pasture in some place away from the wolves, build a safe little sheep community where you can raise your lambs, eat lots of green grass, live in peace, and leave those wolves to their wolfish ways. Leave those wolves to bite and devour each other."* Jesus specifically sends us to live among the wolves. We are sent: sent to leave our comfortable places, our peaceful places, our safe places, and to go and live among the wolves. In the middle of the danger.

Another thing that Jesus did not say is, *"Behold I am sending you like sheep among wolves, so you better learn to blend in. Better learn to talk like a wolf, dress like a wolf, better learn to eat like a wolf, better make sure none of these wolves realize that you're really a sheep. After all, if you don't learn wolfish ways, how are you supposed to survive."* No Jesus calls us to go out among the wolves as sheep. We don't disguise ourselves. We don't give up our identity. Behold I am sending you as sheep, among the wolves. When you stop to reflect on these words, Jesus is suggesting something interesting about the interior life of faithful followers there is a real challenge here to life as usual. Because Jesus' instructions run in precisely the opposite direction from our natural instincts. Sheep don't want to go to the wolves. In the real world, when a sheep encounters a wolf, every instinct it has pushes in the other direction.

This week I read up a little on how a sheep typically reacts in the presence of a wolf. When confronted by a wolf, sheep flock together in a protective group and they maintain what's called a flight distance. They try to stay far enough away that the wolf won't ever be able to get near them. That's not so different from the reaction we metaphorical sheep have in the face of metaphorical wolves. We bunch together. Jesus' instructions push against our natural safety instincts.

Jesus' image here leads us to expect that something inside us will rebel against this mission. If we are truly doing our mission, we should expect to be afraid and uncomfortable. In fact, our fear might be a positive sign, a sign that we are doing what we are supposed to do. As followers of Jesus, if all we feel comfortable and happy and grateful and content, we should ask ourselves some hard questions.

Because some level of fear and discomfort is natural to sheep among wolves, we should beware of rationalizations and excuses for not going among the wolves. "It's too dangerous." "It's not my gift." "Those

wolves are beyond help anyway.” When the time comes to obey this mission we will feel an overwhelming urge to stay in our nice safe sheep pen. We should fight that urge.

When I was a youth leader, I used to say to young people, “Sometimes if you feel afraid about some helping task or some sort of kingdom task, it might be the Holy Spirit telling you that this is what you are supposed to do.” Isn’t it true that the things that we are most afraid of saying and doing in this life, are also the things that are most important: proposing to someone, confronting a friend, asking for forgiveness. Those are all fearful tasks. “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” said Paul. Fear is part of the work of salvation.

Trouble is the natural habitat for Christian mission. We are sent to places where the wolves live. We are the light of the world and no one needs a candle in the middle of the day, you light them in the darkness. You carry them into the darkness. We are called to go out among the wolves in our neighborhood, we are called to go out among the wolves at our office, we are called to go out among the wolves in our own hearts.

If that’s the environment of our mission; what is the mode of our mission? Once they’re among the wolves, how exactly does a sheep behave? That’s the theme of the second part of this saying. First of all, as we face the trouble, we are called to be as shrewd as snakes. Just because the sheep live among the wolves doesn’t mean they ought to throw themselves into the wolves’ jaws. The sheep are not suicidal. Sheep lock their doors sometimes. Sheep get insurance.

The sense of the Greek word for shrewdness here suggests prudence and care. It suggests good judgment. In short, Jesus is saying, “Be wise. Be smart.” It’s a call for intelligent Christians. If we are going to live among the wolves, we better understand what we’re dealing with.

Believe it or not, not all LaGrave’s young people go to a Christian College after they graduate from High School. Some of them go to secular institutions. And especially if they’ve grown up in the relatively protected environment of the Christian School system, this change can be a big shock. They will probably encounter some level of hostility to their faith. They will also be exposed to all sorts of different values and temptations and lifestyles.

When I started university I took a history class that covered the history of ideas. The very first class the prof said, “OK who here believes in God. Half the class raised their hand, myself included. I realized this wasn’t going to be like Sunday school.

Another story: I remember when I was in my first couples of years of seminary, I used to work at a commercial painter back home in Canada. So on Friday in late May I would finish my academic year. I would pack up my stuff and I would move away from this community of scripture and prayer and God talk, and then on Monday morning I would walk onto a job site full of contractors. Let’s just say that the two communities talk about different things and use different words. All of a sudden the air was filled with gutter talk that was both obscene and surprisingly creative.

You’ve got to be as shrewd as a snake to live in that environment. And I think that shrewdness is made up of several things. First, you need to have compassion. You need to understand that these people are also creatures made in the image of God, people whose hearts are hungry to find their true purpose. If you spent enough time with them, you realized that those coarse men who swore and told dirty jokes were hungry for connection and meaning and hope just like everyone else. They were just terrible at finding it.

Second, to be as shrewd as a snake means having some intellectual understanding of the attitudes and the values of the people around them. They are still young so they can’t be experts on human behavior, but ideally, when their atheist psych prof tells them that God is just an idealized Father figure projected by our neuroses, they should have some idea of how to respond

Finally, they need to be smart about their relationship with God. They need to know who they are and what they believe. They need to know their God and understand how he speaks to them and where he can be found, and why he is sometimes silent, and why he allows terrible things to happen. They need to understand who Jesus is and why he saves the world through a cross, instead of through brute force.

Be as shrewd as snakes. When you are sent among the wolves you need to be smart. We must be diligent students of God and diligent students of the world.

The second half of verse 16 tells us something further about the mode of our mission. We are called to be innocent as doves. In English the word innocence has a variety of connotations. In my thesaurus two of the suggested synonyms are gullibility and naiveté. But in calling us to be innocent as doves Jesus is not saying we should be either naive or gullible. The Greek word *hēar* implies innocence in the sense of being uncorrupted. Innocence in the sense of a pure heart. Innocence in the sense of having integrity.

The great temptation for us Christians in our zeal to overcome the wolves, is to compromise our integrity. In other words, our great temptation is to use wolfish methods to overcome the wolves. Jesus says no, we can't compromise our identity as sheep. We must stay as sheep, and we must be innocent as doves.

Do you remember Andy Rooney? He used to be on 60 Minutes years ago. He would come on and give 5 minutes of curmudgeonly commentary at the end of the show. In one of his commentaries Andy Rooney said this, "I've decided I'm against abortion. I think it's murder. But I have a dilemma in that I much prefer the pro-choice to the pro-life people. I'd much rather eat dinner with a group of the former." When we sheep behave like wolves, we drive people away. We may gain a victory in the polls. We may gain political power, but if we do it through wolfish means, we have lost. As Jesus says, "What good is it to gain the whole world and yet forfeit your soul."

Be as innocent as doves. We must hold firmly to what we believe. We must speak the truth boldly. But we must do it with gentleness and integrity. Remember it was when Jesus was suffering for the truth, dying on the cross, that the centurion said, "Surely this man is the Son of God!"

So, can we bring this all together? What does shrewd innocence look like in this world? How does a person who is shrewd as a snake and innocent as a dove behave? A shrewd innocent is someone who is absolutely compassionate and absolutely understanding. A shrewd innocent is someone who sits in the lunchroom at work and talks freely and comfortably with her fellow workers but who never seems to get drawn into the gossip. A shrewd innocent is a person who never criticizes without affection. A shrewd innocent is someone who can live in the middle of this materialist, commercial society and live simply without being self-righteous about it. A shrewd innocent is that professor you knew in college who was prodigious in his knowledge, but absolutely approachable and encouraging and full of love for Jesus.

What does a shrewd innocent look like? A shrewd innocent is someone who can hold the whole world in his hand, and yet take little children on his knee. A shrewd innocent is someone who can say both, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone," and, "Go and sin no more." A shrewd innocent is someone who has the power to call down legions of angels to bring destruction on his enemies, but who instead chooses to call down forgiveness... "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." "Behold I am sending you like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." ©Rev. Peter Jonker