

Like Sheep Among Wolves

Matt. 10:16-23

Intro. A variety of slogans have been used to encourage enlistment in the US Army. Shortly after the US entered WW I Uncle Sam posters were seen everywhere. When the draft was announced at the start of WW II, these posters and slogans became less effective. But in 1971 a new slogan appeared. "Today's Army Wants to Join You." (I never got that one) In 1981 "Be All You Can Be" became the new catchphrase. Then in 2001, despite much criticism from Army brass, "An Army of One" was promoted. More recently, during the war on terror, "A call to duty" has seemed to resonate.

The point is this...the military developed their slogans and graphics for maximum appeal. Each slogan was designed to coincide with some contemporary interest, passion or mindset. The parallel isn't precise and Jesus was never interested in capitalizing on societal interest or recruitment by way of catchy slogans. But if Jesus had a slogan, it might have been this...**I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.** That's what He said in **Matt. 10:16**. Note that Jesus didn't say His sheep might meet up with a few wolves along the way. He said, you will be like **sheep among wolves**. The sheep are the feeble minority...the wolves are the powerful majority. Wow!...If "macho appeal" matters, Christ's slogan fails miserably. I always wanted to be a sheep, didn't you? Where can we sign up?

Sensing a problem inherent in the image...an artist has tried to boost God's recruitment campaign by improving the graphic. Now that's more like it. This lamb is locked and loaded!

As we consider the instructions Jesus gave His first apostles, let's remember **Matt. 9:36 - When He (Jesus) saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.** When Jesus gave His apostles **authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness (10:1)**, the Twelve may have puffed out their chests and felt a rush of excitement. Armed with divine power, they would be heroes to their helpless countrymen. It was a shame Jesus asked them take only the tunic they were wearing. They hoped He'd let them wear their super-hero outfits. After all, the powers at their disposal would make them impressive, dominant and strong. They would do things doctors and clerics were powerless to do. They were certain the harassed and helpless sheep of Israel would receive them warmly wherever they went. Who knows, before leaving a town, they might even be honored with a ticker tape parade?

Now I'm speaking facetiously and no doubt exaggerating. But I think it's at least interesting to compare **9:36** with statements that follow. The Twelve probably nodded with agreement when the Galileans were compared to harassed and helpless sheep. "*Yep, that's what they are alright.*" But Jesus surprised His men in **10:16** when He said, **I am sending you out like sheep...** Though not spoken out loud, they may have thought..."*Wait a minute Jesus... You have this wrong...they're the helpless sheep, we're the mighty-miracle-working shepherds. They're the needy ones in distress and we are their rescuers...their heroes. They are ignorant and we have the message they need.*" To which Jesus quietly breathed a response..."*No, fella's... You have it wrong...I am sending you out like sheep.*" To understand what Jesus meant, consider first...

1. The Analogy – 16a - I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.

Throughout the Bible people are compared to sheep. You know this. Much has been written about this analogy. One of the finest books on the subject was written by Phillip Keller. It's entitled, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23. I recommend it. Having been employed as a shepherd in Canada, Keller knows sheep. He knows what God meant by the comparison. There's some truth in the fact that sheep are proverbially stupid creatures. They can't find food or water for themselves. If their wool becomes matted with mud they become top heavy. If they fall over, they may not be able to right themselves. They may die right on the spot.

If they wander from the flock, they have no ability to find their way back to the fold. Sheep depend on their shepherds for everything. But the point of the analogy here isn't their stupidity...the point is their vulnerability. We'll come back to this verse later, but **Isa. 53:7** says, **as a sheep before her shearers is silent...** Sheep are gentle, harmless and defenseless. They can be panicked by something harmless. Yet at other times they walk into harm's way. When they finally sense danger, they can't run fast or fight. And Jesus said, **I am sending you out like sheep...** So much for the notion of dominance and strength...so much for the super hero costumes! "*I guess we misunderstood.*" Jesus came the first time as the Lamb of God and those who follow Him will be like sheep. Sheep are helpless and vulnerable. That's what Jesus means. Hearing this, with the Adversary's whispering doubts, the apostles may have wondered... "*Is this what I signed on for?...What was I thinking?*"

But notice the rest of **v.16. I am sending you out like sheep...among wolves.** This makes matters worse! A shepherd's responsibility is to keep the wolves away from the sheep. That's why he carries a rod. A wolf has only one interest in sheep and its not friendship...it's called "dinner." Wolves and sheep are mortal enemies. But unlike a shepherd whose duty is to protect the sheep, Jesus said, "*It's a jungle out there and I'm sending you right into the wolf pack...so expect trouble.*" As these verses unfold, we'll see who the wolves are and how God's witnesses must respond in such a hostile environment. To summarize our text this AM...Jesus prepared these first missionaries to expect ferocious adversity from religion / from government / from family members / and from society at large. That includes just about everybody on the other side of the Gospel. But first let's consider...

2. The Admonition - 16b - Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

This is the core or heart of the instruction given in **vs.16-23**. Here Jesus explains how His people must live and serve in a hostile world. The two simile's are...**shrewd as snakes** and **innocent as doves**. The instruction to be **shrewd as snakes** conveys the idea of cleverness and intelligence. If sheep are stupid and vulnerable, snakes are shrewd and evasive. There's Bible support for this... **Gen.3:1** says, **Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made.** Have you ever tried to catch a snake? I chased a speedy garter snake half way around our house until it disappeared under a patio stone. Why was I so bent on catching it? Because if Peggy saw one peaking out from the Hostas, like I did, I'd have to hire a new gardener. That's it, she'd quit! I remember the day Peggy saw a snake dangling from a bush near our birdfeeder. I almost had to send her somewhere for counseling.

Can we agree on something? Would you agree that sometimes Christian people are not the brightest crayons in the box? Jesus agrees. He said, **For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. – Lk.16:8b** We need to chew on that. The admonition to be **as shrewd as snakes** means to be smart and evasive. Snakes don't go out with a chip on their shoulder and looking for trouble. Rather than allowing themselves to be caught or stepped on, they're quick to get out of the way. When we're sent out preaching the Gospel, we will be **like sheep among wolves**. We can't do anything about that. But when we see a wolf pack coming, we should head the other way. When the wolves lunge, we should step aside. When they open their mouths we shouldn't jump in. Like snakes, we must be cautious, street-wise and know when to run. This is reinforced in **v.17** where Jesus said, **Be on your guard against men** and then in **v.23** where He said, **When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another.** So Jesus encourages His messengers to be prudent and sensible. They weren't to be naive' nor were they to go out looking for trouble. At times, the smartest thing to do is to run...to avoid or escape the conflict.

The second simile, **innocent as doves**, relates to purity of character and conduct. **Innocent** means unmixed...it means to be holy and different from the world. In the Bible, **doves**, like sheep, were considered clean animals. A **dove** when sacrificed was an instrument of atonement.

A **dove** was the agent by which people were made clean and made right with God. That's the goal or objective of Gospel ministry. So Christ's messengers must not provide their adversaries with reasons to accuse and write them off. We must be free of immorality and ulterior motives. We must keep our reputations in the neighborhood and workplace as clean as we can. Whether missionaries in a hostile country or employees in a godless workplace, we must live clean lives while not poking sticks in the eyes of those who oppose us. We must be like the One who sends us out. **1 Pet. 2:21-23** says, **To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.**

So the main point of this section is simple. As believers, we are vulnerable **like sheep among wolves**. Our strength, adequacy and protection come from God. Though Jesus has promised to be with us and to never forsake us, the world is no friend to Jesus or His righteousness. As Paul wrote in **Eph. 6:12** the conflict is spiritual...the age-old conflict between the prince of darkness and the sons of light. Our life and mission will bring us into conflict with people who have a running argument with God. The nature of this conflict demands that we be **shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves**.

3. The Adversity – vs. 17-23 Let's read the whole passage and then consider it in four sections. **"Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.**

Christ's teachings here have been compared to a telescope. Some of what Jesus said related to adversity that was immediate. Other parts of what He said would be true for the apostles as well as for believers during the entire church age. Still other parts would be fulfilled in the coming Tribulation. Like many OT prophecies, events that were near and far away are often combined without reference to when they would occur. In addition, some prophecies were not limited to one fulfillment, but looked ahead to more than one. For example, in **vs.17, 18** Jesus said, **they** (the wolves) **will hand you** (my sheep) **over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.** This came to pass in the first century and was recorded in the Book of Acts. But this has also happened throughout the history of the Church. Just the other night, the Mountaineers watched an animated movie that depicts the life of William Tyndale. In the eyes of the Church of England, Tyndale committed a capital offense when he translated the Bible from Latin into English. In 1536 he was brought before a tribunal and sentenced to be burned at the stake.

Then notice **vs. 21, 22 - Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.** While these conditions were partially fulfilled during the Inquisitions / the Crusades / and attempted genocide by Adolf Hitler and other godless regimes, a future fulfillment is described in Revelation. It will take place during the Great Tribulation. At that time the AntiChrist will try to rid the world of Jews and Christians and any who refuse to worship Him or receive His mark. **(Rev. 13:15)** The point is this...these instructions were not just for the Apostles during their short term mission trip.

They have a wider application. Like a telescope they project beyond the first century through the Church Age and Tribulation to **the end** when Jesus returns in power and glory. So let's consider the wolves. They emerge from four sectors...from religion / government / family / and society at large. In facing adversity from these sectors, Jesus calls us to be **wise as snakes and innocent as doves**.

The first source of adversity the believer should expect is...**Religious – 17 - "Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues.**

The key that identifies this adversity is found in the phrases, **local councils** and **synagogues**. Throughout Israel, synagogues were not just places of worship. They also served like town halls where disputes were settled and city councils met. Opposition from the religious sector was just beginning to heat up when Jesus gave these instructions. If you remember, the Pharisees were incensed that Jesus forgave the paralyzed man. They accused Him of blasphemy. They also slandered Him because He befriended tax collectors and sinners. So the opposition was heating up and getting organized. In just a short time, religious leaders would accuse Jesus and bring Him before Caiaphas, the High Priest.

After the Resurrection and Pentecost, Peter boldly preached at the Temple. To the men of Israel He said, **You handed Him (Jesus) over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. – Acts 3:13-15** For the first few decades, the persecution the early church suffered was almost entirely by the Jews. Peter and John were cast into prison for preaching the Gospel. Paul was persecuted by the silversmiths at Ephesus and then falsely accused of bringing a Gentile into the Temple. In each case, the truth was opposed by the religious establishment.

In the end times, Babylon the Great will be a worldwide religious system that will hunt down and seek to eliminate Christians. This great religious system will be the culmination of every false system that has hated Christ and His people. **Rev. 17:5, 6 - This title was written on her forehead: MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.** This final world church may consist of a merger between apostate Christianity and Islam...a merger that will take place after the true Church is air-lifted.

So the first source of adversity is religious. Our brothers and sisters in Russia know all about this. Their little congregations are mocked and threatened by the Russian Orthodox...the state church. Yet persecution is far worse for Christians in many other places where Islam is predominant. The cover of Newsweek Magazine, dated Feb. 13, 2012 read, "The War on Christians." The lead article by Ayaan Hirsi Ali wrote this...*"We hear so often about Muslims as victims of abuse in the West and combatants in the Arab Spring's fight against tyranny. But, in fact, a wholly different kind of war is underway—an unrecognized battle costing thousands of lives. Christians are being killed in the Islamic world because of their religion. It is a rising genocide that ought to provoke global alarm. From blasphemy laws to brutal murders to bombings to mutilations and the burning of holy sites, Christians in so many nations live in fear."*

Yet aside from religion, adversity would come from a second sector...from **Government – vs.18-20 - On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.** This source of adversity is identified in the phrase, **governors and kings**. During the past 2,000 years, the state has been the major source of hostility and persecution.

The Apostle John was banished to Patmos and the only one of the Twelve Apostles to escape execution by the Roman Empire. Until early in the 4th century when Emperor Constantine experienced an epiphany and some sort of conversion, Rome tortured and executed hundreds of thousands of Christians. Persecution and martyrdom continued through the Dark Ages. In more recent times, hatred for Christianity escalated with the rise of Communism and Socialism. John MacArthur writes, *“Government is ordained by God but manipulated by Satan.”* **For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. – Eph. 6:12**

Notice several things about **vs.18-20**. **First**, the fact that believers would be **brought before governors and kings** is stated in a positive light. I mean, this isn't all bad! Jesus said, **you will be... witnesses to them and to the Gentiles**. Adversity would provide an entre' for missionaries into halls of justice and oval offices. Government officials would hear a Gospel witness they were otherwise shielded from. This happens throughout Acts as Paul appeared before seven Roman officials. Can you name them? Me either. I looked them up. 1. Sergius Paulus, the deputy governor of Cyprus / 2. Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia / 3. Claudius Lysias, commander of 1,000 men / 4. Felix, a long-standing Roman judge / 5. Porcius Festus, a procurator of Judea / 6. Herod Agrippa, a Judean monarch / and 7. Publius, the chief Roman official on the Island of Malta. Aside from these officials, Paul witnessed to hundreds of soldiers as they took turns guarding him. Now that's what you call "a captive audience."

Don't you get the feeling that whenever Jesus said something prophetically, He really meant it? These men with titles and authority were privileged to hear the Good News about the resurrected Christ who loved them and died for them. As Joseph said...**“They (the unsaved authorities) meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.”**

The second thing I notice is the encouragement Jesus gave His missionaries in **vs.19, 20 - But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.** Isn't this the big thing that often concerns us as Christians? If we dare to speak for Christ, what should we say? We don't want to sound ignorant or dumb. We don't want to come off as judgmental or rude. Jesus says, *“Don't worry about what to say. I've got this.”* **You will be given what to say. The Spirit of your Father will speak through you.** *“Trust Me. Remember, you're a welfare case... you're totally dependent...you're a sheep. I am your Shepherd and my sheep know my voice.”* It isn't our initiative or cleverness that wins the lost...it's the power and wisdom of Christ in us. Amen?

I don't want to sound overly dramatic, but if trends continue and the rapture is delayed...we may lose our tax exempt status and I may go to jail for what we believe and preach. We say, not in America. It couldn't happen! Oh yeah? The government of our once “Christian nation” is increasingly hostile to Christianity. Is there anything more annoying than a speed bump? That's what the Church is to the world. The restrainer is the Holy Spirit in the Church. He doesn't stop all sin, but He slows it down.

The third source of adversity is...**Family - 21 - “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.**

This is tough. We can understand opposition from those who are passionate about their religion. And we can see how governments tend to over-reach in their quest for control. But opposition from family hurts deeply. For many, family is the highest earthly value. To be cut off from family because of faith in Christ is no easy thing. Yet this is what happens for many who come to faith. I saw this growing up when my dad's family turned against him. They called him a “holy roller” and openly ridiculed his faith. In some parts of the world, people will hold a funeral service for a family member who trusts Christ.

Even worse, Jesus said brothers will betray each other and some parents will turn their children in to the authorities and have them put to death. In history this happened during the Roman persecutions, the Inquisitions and it's happening under the Islamic Caliphate today. It will happen again in the Great Tribulation. In **v.36** Jesus said, '**a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.**'

The fourth and final source of adversity is comprehensive. Aside from religion, government and family, believers should expect opposition from...**Society – vs. 22-23 - All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.**

By this point we should understand what Jesus meant when He said, **like sheep among wolves.** Disciples will always be outnumbered. The religions of the world will hate us. The government, though sometimes tolerant, will be annoyed by us. Unsaved family will turn against us. If the wolf pack isn't yet big enough, **v.22** says, **All men will hate you because of Me.** This is a hard pill to swallow. True Christians will never be "cool," "hip," or welcome in the "in crowd..." though sometimes we foolishly try to be. Jesus said, **"Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets."** - **Lk. 6:26** The Apostle Paul wrote, **In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted – II Tim. 3:12** He experienced this firsthand.

The hard, cold reality is this...we should not expect to be treated well by sinners who love their sin and hate our belief that God will judge sin someday. Because we live in a dog eat dog world where people get what they earn...people have little understanding or appreciation for grace. Having believed Satan's lie, they are hostile to God and hostile to His children.

Just ask yourself...why is such a fine Christian athlete like Tim Teboe so unpopular, so mocked and so hated? Why have companies like Chic-Fil-A, Hobby Lobby and others become targets of hostility, legal assault and market sabotage? Why are some Christian men with proven worth held back from promotion? Why is the IRS harassing Christian organizations?

Woven throughout this chapter, Jesus explains how we sheep are to respond when attacked by wolves. The general instruction is given in **v.16b - Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.** Yet four specific instructions emerge as the text unfolds. **#1 - Be on your guard against men (v. 17) #2 - Do not worry about what to say or how to say it (v.19). #3 - stand firm to the end (v.22)** is the expectation for all who belong to Jesus. **#4 - When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. (v.23)**

This AM we can't address every question raised by this passage. Tonight at 6 PM, for a few minutes before our Quarterly Business Meeting, I'll try to explain what standing firm to the end means in **v.22.** Y'all come back now, here? But let me send you away with a challenge. Though believers are vulnerable like sheep led to the slaughter **Rom. 8:35, 37** says, **neither trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord because in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.**

To be sheep among wolves may sound like a slogan for defeat. But like David when facing Goliath, Jesus calls us stand in His strength as victors. We can face adversity without fear because **the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. - I Jn.4:4** We'll explore this further next time. In the meantime, I want you to read the excerpt from John Bunyan reproduced on the back of our sermon notes for the morning. Speaking the language of grace, Bunyan explains the options for sheep when attacked and how we can determine what God wants us do. I think you'll find it profitable.