

## The Commands of Christ

### Sermon #19

#### *"Be As Wise As Serpents"*

#### **Matt 10: 16-22**

In our last study on the commands of Christ we considered the command to "Pray for Laborers" in Matthew 9:38. But it is not enough to just pray we must also be willing to go. It is fitting then that the next command that we are going to be considering is found in His words to His disciples as He sent them out. What we find here is important because it has something to say to all of his servants, past, present and future.

*"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. (17) But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. (18) You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. (19) But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; (20) for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you. "*

There are in fact three imperatives in these verses. The first imperative is found in verse sixteen in the word translated "*behold*" (idou) it is a command to "*pay special attention*" to what is about to be said. He first of all says that he is sending the disciples as "*sheep in the midst of wolves.*" It is consistent with the nature of wolves to attack the flocks of sheep it is not consistent with nature that the sheep is going to walk into the wolf's den. In contrast to what some preach will happen when you get saved today, all along Jesus has promised his disciples that there lives will have hardship, suffering and perhaps even death.

Also notable is that sheep have no defense except running and they are not too good at that! The only other thing they can do is to call out to the shepherd. A defenseless sheep in the midst of a pack of wolves would stand no chance of survival without the faithful protection of a courageous shepherd.

It is that sense of helplessness and dependence that the Lord wants of us. You may remember that God gave Gideon the formidable challenge of liberating the Israelites from the might of the Midianites. When he sent him with the words (Judges 4: 15) "*Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?*"

Gideon responds by saying, (4:16) "*O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.*" It is the awareness of his complete inadequacy that enabled him to be used so mightily by God.

The next imperative is the word translated ""be you"" or ""you be"" (*ginesthe*) and has two applications.

### *The Disciple Is To Be Shrewd Minded*

First, Jesus said they are to be "*as wise as serpents.*" Here the Lord was alluding to the belief at the time that the serpent was smart, cunning and cautious and in that characteristic Christians are to emulate them. One of the ways that the snake shows its shrewdness is by its judgment when to strike. A snake if given a choice between attacking an intruder or beating a hasty retreat, will usually make a hasty exit. The snake knows to pick his fights.

Paul advises believers (Col. 4:5) "*Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time*" or as (*The Message*) translates that verse, "*Use your heads as you five and work among outsiders. Don't miss a trick. Make the most of every opportunity.*"

The idea is that of saying the right thing at the right place and time. It is not wise to be unnecessarily inflammatory, to always present a harsh and accusatory attitude. Being a faithful disciple of Jesus does not require that we be inconsiderate, belligerent or abrasive.

The most common Greek word for wise is (*sophos*) but that is not the word used here. Instead the word is (*phronimos*) from the word which means "to rein in or to curb." We are to rein in our natural response to any given situation and first seek to understand what Lord would have us to do.

But because shrewdness alone can degenerate into cheap cunning it must be balanced with innocence. Therefore Jesus says,

### *The Disciple Is To Be Soft Hearted.*

Secondly, Jesus also said that we are to be "*As harmless as doves*" the word translated "*harmless*" (*akeraioi*) means unmixed or pure. Doves present innocence but innocence does not mean naïve. Peter in (1 Peter 3:19-20) (*The Message*) "*What counts is that you put up with it for God's sake when you're treated badly for no good reason. (20) There's no particular virtue in accepting punishment that you well deserve. But if you're treated badly for good behavior and continue in spite of it to be a good servant, that is what counts with God.*" So in other words if people are going to bring accusation against you make sure they have to make it up.

This same word rendered "*harmless*" is found in two places in scripture (Romans 16:19 and Phil 2:15). In Philippians 2:14-16 Paul states, "*Do all things without complaining and disputing, (15) that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, (16) holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.*"

In Romans 16:19, Paul advises the church, "*For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil.*"

When Paul says he wants them to be "simple" concerning evil he uses the same word used in our text. God wants to be wise concerning good and naive about the shameful activities of evil.

We are therefore to embody the two characteristics of keenness and innocence. There are many biblical characters who embody these two characteristics. Such is seen in the actions of David in his relationship with King Saul. King Saul because of his envy of David set out to kill him. And although David spent years literally running for his life, when given the opportunity to kill Saul he refused to do so (1 Sam 24 & 26). He demonstrated cunning in evading Saul and innocence in his unwillingness to be vengeful.

They are also seen in the actions of the godly Mordecai in his reaction to the arrogant Haman in the story of Esther. (Esther 3:2-4, 4:12-14). In the book of Esther, when Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman he was enraged and set out to destroy all of the Jewish race. Haman was able was cunning in his use of Esther to inform the king of Haman's murderous plot and innocence in his unwillingness to seek revenge. In ironic justice Haman was hanged on the gallows he had intended for Mordecai.

These two characteristics are also seen in the story of Abigail the good woman with the foolish husband, Nabal (1 Sam. 25:3). As David is fleeing across the country, David appealed to a man named Nabal for provisions for his men. Nabal not only refused he did so in a rude and insulting way. When Nabal's wife, Abigail, heard what her husband had done she immediately set out to undo the damage of her husband's insult. Her wisdom in handling the insulted she averted disaster for her family.

The third imperative is found in verse seventeen, we Jesus says, "*Beware of men,*" the word "*beware*" (*prosechete*). Literally he is

warning his disciples "be on your guard against them."

William Hendricksen in his commentary on Matthew suggests that this can mean any one of the following.

- a. Do not naively intrust yourselves to me.
- b. Do not without good cause make them angry.
- c. Do not fall into the traps of their catch but pray for grace to give them the appropriate answer.

d. Do nothing that you might enable them to bring a valid charge against you.

bring a valid charge against you.

[William Henricksen. New Testament Commentaries: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) p. 4621

The apostle Peter makes this clear when he says, (1 Peter 4:15-16), "*But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. (16) Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.*"

Jesus next proceeds to identify the "wolves" and gives warnings about four areas in which they will persecute believers - from religion, government, family and society in general. It is not the Lord's purpose to frighten the disciples or make us suspicious of every one who is not a believer. But we needed to be reminded that not everyone will receive the gospel with open arms.

*Faith in the Lord may result in persecution from religious sources in "verse seventeen" ... for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues.* The courts or councils referred to here are religious courts. The persecution of the early church would primarily come from the religious crowd. And down through the centuries persecution has often come from inside rather than outside. When Paul reminds the believer's in Romans 2:13 to, "*Bless those who persecute you*" if you look at the context it is directed to Christians about how they are treated by other Christians.

*Faith in the Lord may result in persecution from those in government in verse eighteen, 'You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.'* I think the really important thing to see in this verse is the world will attack us only so much as they see Christ in us.

*Faith in the Lord may result in division within the family, verse twenty-one, 'Now brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.'* Even today in many parts of the world for a person to become a believer means that their own family will persecute them. In certain religious cultures a funeral service is held for a family member who becomes a Christian because in the eyes of the relatives they are no longer alive. In some instances those who convert to Christianity may have members of their own family try to kill them.

Faith In the Lord may result in persecution from society as a whole, verse twenty-two, "*And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.*"

The three commands found in these verses are:

The first command is that we are to "*Behold*, pay special attention to" the fact that we are sent as sheep among the wolves. Our primary defense is dependence on the Shepherd.

The Second command is two-fold We are to be Shrewd Minded And We are to be Soft Hearted.

The Third command is that we are to beware of men - that is we are to be on guard against being taken unaware.