

Matthew 10v16

Wise as Serpents Harmless as Doves

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“Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”

The reason that Jesus gave for the need for his disciples to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves, was that there were surrounded by their adversaries or satans, which he described as being wolves. Wolves are pack animals which hunt the weak and vulnerable seeking to separate the weak from the strong and then go in for the kill. They are predators who survive by any means necessary and are not at all like the sheep of the flock who band together on a different basis, for their mutual protection.

These enemies were the religious bigots and blasphemers of that day and generation. The arrogantly pious Pharisees, the hypocritical and treacherous Sadducees, the political marred and corrupt Herodians or the violent and uncompromising Zealots, to name but the main groups, but any false religion of every colour and hue were also implemented in this condemnation. Wolves savage the sheep, and when this is done it is not always realised, even by the victims as this is a spiritual not a physical massacre.

The next verses go on to warn of the danger of putting any real trust in people. ***“But beware of men”***. There is no other enemy but mankind, if it is not other people, then it is we ourselves who are our own worst enemy. The apostles knew this and had been reminded by their master of this, and yet one of them was to particularly betray him in a troubling way, Judas Iscariot. Animals also have much to teach us, as Jesus states.

We can apply these issues to others if they are mindful that it is the apostles who are primarily involved in these remarks of the Lord. They were to preach the gospel and ensure that those who heard them understood the message. Gentiles and even Samaritans were not to be included in the audience. Accordingly,

we can conclude that it is not opposition of other cultures that were regarded as the wolves, but those who were also Jewish and should have known better. The wolves are a negative role model.

Sheep are those who know the good shepherd, and who are herd animals of the flock, they stick together. The little flock is not to fear, because of its limited size and lack of powerful rams, who would be insufficient to protect the flock from a pack of wolves. Instead of relying upon any natural strength and size of horns in their rams, the sheep were exhorted to use wisdom as their defence. They were not to headbutt their opponents with their horns but to be as harmless as doves. This goes against nature, a strong ram can injure someone, but not a dove. The aspect of the sheep that Jesus seems to focus on in context is that of working together. Mark 6v7 teaches that Jesus expressly sent the twelve out two by two in a parallel passage.

The wisdom that a serpent has is striking. It is not the wisdom of guile, the subtle betrayal of a snake by deceit is not what is intended here. Jesus would ask nothing of his disciples which he himself had first not accomplished. We are told that, he did no sin, NEITHER WAS GUILE FOUND in his mouth 1 Peter 2v22.

Those who mirror Christ demonstrate this characteristic, see Revelation 14v5. This is therefore something we should be tuned to, that we can use guile to attack others or defend ourselves, thinking we are so clever, but this was never the way that Jesus acted.

James informs us that the wisdom that is from above is first pure and then peaceable 3v17. Earlier it is stated that a wise man should be recognised by a good conversation, which means manner of life, not so much the words spoken. This was also to be done with meekness of wisdom, not arrogance and condescending superiority.

The serpent exercises wisdom in the sense that it is slow and calculating in its aspect, and then at the most appropriate moment acts with alacrity and determination having fully vetted

the situation to its personal advantage. A serpent or snake is respected because it does not waste energy and effort in pointless actions which consume its energies and exhaust its circumstance, but seeks positional advantage whilst it assesses its foe, either predator or prey. It acts largely in self defence and cannot be said to be harmless often being the possessor of toxic venom which can paralyse or kill those it bites. However, these aspects of the serpent are not intended to be emulated because Christ qualifies the exhortation with the need to be harmless.

The wisdom of the serpent which Jesus seems to refer to in context was that of the calculation and assessment which can lead to advantage but not merely personal advantage which would be harmful, but the advantage of the opponent. Those under the gaze would not be harmed by the bite of the snake, nor eaten by the devouring fangs but would be forced to retreat by the outmanoeuvring skill of the animal, without engaging in actual combat. We can learn much even from considering snakes!

When we reason and argue with our spiritual adversaries, are we being as wise as serpents if we bite and poison them? If they are negatively harmed by our interactions, can we really be those who follow this advice? Harmless of course must refer to the true harm of the soul, not the temporary embarrassment and humiliation of being wrong! However, those concerned to be harmless will soften the blow of victory because they wish to win over their adversary, not to stomp them into the ground in brazen vanquishing of the defeated. The better victory is not to make the enemy squeal but to convert him into accepting the truth that we wish to illuminate them with.

On their own doves can be almost foolish creatures, which fly about in a seemingly haphazard way, lacking any perceived wisdom, but acting quite scatterbrained. They are a nuisance to those who come across them, as they will suddenly fly off, in a bizarre direction startling and confusing even themselves.

However, they are not deemed the wise in this context. Jesus does not say become fully like a dove, just as we are not to be fully like a serpent, nor fully like a sheep, each has its own desirable characteristics.

This is an unusual juxtaposition of animals. Who other than Jesus would think to combine three so totally different creatures into one context of thought? It is inspired by God the Father, the creator of all, and the arbiter of all standards of acceptable behaviour. We are not to adopt another nature from another of God's creation but to be a specific amalgam of various, drawing the best and most appropriate characteristics which when moulded together in an unnatural but entirely fitting way, brings about a hybrid creature that is truly unique and God honouring.

A Voice from the Altar

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