

SHEEP, WOLVES, SERPENTS, AND DOVES

Presented by

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Today when Tyler spoke to you about “Birds, Prophets, and Christians,” and when Blake spoke to you about “Ants Versus Lazybones,” they gave you several examples of how various Bible writers used illustrations from nature—and specifically illustrations from the animal kingdom—to get across important spiritual points. But it was not just the writers of the Bible who did such things. Jesus Himself also used illustrations about animals to teach people extremely valuable lessons.

For example, in Matthew 10:16 Jesus told His disciples, “I send you out as **sheep** in the midst of **wolves**. Therefore, be wise as **serpents** and harmless as **doves**.” In this lesson I would like to invite you to study with me three things related to that passage: (1) the context of Christ’s comments; (2) the reason He chose the specific animals He did to illustrate His points; and (3) whether or not Christ’s statements apply to us as Christians.

As we begin, let’s investigate the context in which Christ said to His disciples, “I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be wise as **serpents** and harmless as **doves**.” Matthew 10:5-7 explains that Christ issued this warning as He was preparing the disciples to take the Gospel message to the children of Israel. Christ knew, of course, that there would be times when the message that His disciples were going to be preaching would be ignored. He also knew that there would be times when the message would make the Jews angry because they did not like what they were hearing. As a result, Christ realized that there was a very good possibility that His disciples would be physically mistreated. He therefore wanted those disciples to know, “If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore **the world hates you**” (John 15:19). In fact, in John 17:14 Jesus made it crystal clear to His disciples that they while they were **in** the world, they were “not **of** the world.”

It was in that context where Christ said that He was sending out the disciples “as sheep in the midst of wolves.” The people “in the world” were the wolves, and Christ’s disciples were the sheep. Are wolves generally a threat to sheep? Indeed they are! Why so? It is because wolves seek to kill sheep. Very few animals are as defenseless as sheep. In fact, about the only self-defense mechanism a sheep has is its ability to run away. Perhaps this explains why Christ told His disciples, “Whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet” (Matthew 10:14). Christ did not instruct His disciples to defend themselves. Rather, He told them to “depart.” Still, He did want them to be forewarned concerning what to expect as they tried to carry out His commission to “preach the Gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). They needed to know that they were the sheep, and that the world into which they were being sent was filled with wolves!

But Christ also told His disciples to “be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves.” It was not by accident that Christ chose those two animals as illustrations to get His point across. First, consider the serpent. The writer of the book of Proverbs said, “There are three things which are too wonderful for me... the way of an eagle in the air, **the way of a serpent on a rock**, and the way of a ship in the midst of the sea” (Proverbs 30:18-19). While we may not often stop to think about it, the fact remains that snakes are intelligent, wily creatures. They know how to lie in wait to attack and devour their prey. They know where to hide to avoid becoming the prey of other animals. They know how to camouflage themselves. They know how to warn animals around them that they do not want to be bothered. And so on. The Lord’s advice to His disciples to “be as wise as serpents” was well stated.

Second, however, consider also the dove. Christ’s admonition to His followers to be “as harmless as doves” is something that they easily would have understood. While it is true that few animals are more defenseless than sheep, it also is true that few animals are as harmless and gentle as a dove. Surely it was not by accident that after Christ was baptized, “the Spirit descended upon Him **like a dove**” (Mark 1:10). That was God’s gentle-yet-impressive way of saying, “You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (vs. 11). Nor is it by accident that when people today want to offer an impressive showing, while at the same time making a gentle point, they use doves to do it. Think of the many times through the millennia that doves have been released at wedding celebrations in honor of brides and grooms. Or, think of the innumerable occasions on which magicians have pulled doves out of hats or from underneath colored cloths. No one is **afraid** of a dove—yet everyone is **impressed** by one! And that is what Christ wanted for His followers. He did not want people to be afraid of them—so that they could listen to them, obey the message they preached, and be saved as a result.

Third, I would like us to inquire about whether or not Christ’s admonition to His disciples applies to us as Christians today. When Christ said, “I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore, be wise as **serpents** and harmless as **doves**,” were those comments intended only for His first-century followers, or do they still apply to us in the twenty-first century? Question: Are we God’s sheep? Yes, we are—as Jesus explained when He said in John 10:27, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.” Question: When we as God’s sheep try to carry out the Great Commission to take the Gospel to “every creature” (Mark 16:15), might we sometimes find ourselves “in the midst of wolves”? Indeed we might, since “all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world” (1 John 2:16). In John 15:18 Jesus warned us, “If the world hates you, know that it hated Me before it hated you”—which explains why Christ said, “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man” (Luke 6:22). That is pretty plain talk, is it not?

Should we today be “as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves?” Yes, we should. The writer of the book of Proverbs put it this way: “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, but the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness” (Proverbs 15:1-2). If people treat **us** badly, we are not to treat **them** badly in return. The apostle Peter wrote: “Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts...having a good conscience so that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil” (1 Peter 3:15-17).

That is the essence of what Christ was saying when He told us to be “as harmless as doves.” Doves are **gentle** and **impressive**—which is exactly what we as Christians must strive to be. Remember that Jesus also said, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). When we do that, then we will have fulfilled our calling to be as gentle as we are wise.