

Christ Reformation Church

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Wise as Serpents – A Practical Theology of Evil

(Part 1 – Introduction)

December 6, 2015

Sermon Text: Matthew 10:16-17a

Scripture Reading: Matthew 10

Introduction-

"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men..."

(Matthew 10:16-17a)

In the years prior to World War II, as Germany under Hitler was re-arming in violation of the treaty that ended WWI, naivety, arrogance, and a fantasy view of world peace almost destroyed England and her allies. Hitler's efforts were not unnoticed, but the warnings given were not heeded for the most part until the cost of

stopping this terror rose to what was ultimately paid – millions of lives lost. One exception to this naivety was Sir Winston Churchill who repeatedly warned his nation of the impending threat. Few would listen. But one of the things thing Churchill was able to do was to participate in efforts to find a way to detect enemy airplanes while they were still a distance away from England. Germany was obviously building its air force and this is where the real threat would come from.

Churchill noted that when people truly perceive a threat and set their minds to devising a way to meet that threat, incredible things can be invented. And so it was with this thing called RADAR which proved to be a life saver for England in coming years. A small group of scientists and leaders spared no effort to perfect this system of radio waves. Why? *Because they saw the threat. They knew the threat was real. You might say, the enemy was on their radar.*

Largely, far and wide, the church of our day does not have *evil* on her radar screen. Why? Because the evil is not

there? Of course not. It is there in droves. But evil is not on our radar because *most Christians do not want to admit of its existence among them*. They have a fantasy worldview. They talk a lot about Satan in many cases, but believe that he is surely anywhere but in their own circles and definitely he would never visit their church.

This new sermon series that we are embarking upon, *Wise as Serpents*, is a *practical* theology of evil. By that adjective, I mean that my purpose is to expose evil in its presence and *practice*. To show what it looks like and who its agents are. I also mean that our method is not primarily to produce an academic, theoretical, nor philosophical treatise, but rather an *experiential* and real life (yet profoundly spiritual) walk in the footsteps of Christ's people sent out as sheep in the midst of wolves. It is *practical* truth for *practicing* followers of Jesus Christ who, whether they fully realize it or not, actually *do* have a roaring lion on the prowl seeking to devour them.

How can I best introduce this topic and demonstrate the vital need for us to understand it? Let me try by giving some real illustrations and then considering the typical response to these things. Many of you here in this church have heard some of these examples before, but we will repeat

them now for the benefit of others who, hopefully, will listen to or read this series.

How Evil Comes to Church

As a new pastor, I had been a police officer on Friday in 1993 and by Monday I was the pastor of a small church way up in the mountains of Montana. I had 14 years experience in police work, so I was no novice when it came to dealing with man's wickedness. The problem was, what I dealt with as a police officer was for the most part *outward, visible evil that violated criminal laws*. You could see it. Robbery. Assault. Murder. Drunk driving, and so on. But when it came to the evil we so often face in the church (or even in other relationships in our lives) I was a novice. It would be over 25 years before my eyes were really opened to the nature of this evil, what its goals are, and the tactics it uses to destroy Christ's people. Here is how evil came to every single one of the churches I have pastured, and one example comes from another church that I have had firsthand experience with:

- A man and his wife profess to be Christians. He is on the church board and is well thought of in the community. Over time, in weekly Bible studies, he opposes the idea of God's perfect holiness

and how we must be perfectly holy in order to be in His presence. When his wife is ill, he takes the pastor aside the next week and says “you are not fit to be a pastor. When we are sick we expect you to visit us.” This man later runs off with another man’s wife.

- A man and his wife move into the community, profess to be Christians, and become active in the church. After two years he calls a secret meeting together to air his complaints about the pastor, and specifically about the subject of the sermons (a series on the Gospel of John). This group invites the pastor and his wife to the fellow’s house for “lunch” and the women ask the pastor’s wife to go for a walk. After they leave, this man and his group begin to criticize and accuse the pastor of not being “available” to them. The ring leader pauses occasionally to read Bible verses and say prayers. When his charges are rejected, he leads 20 people out of that small church.
- Rick is a young single man in his 20’s who craves to work in youth ministry. He frequently invites younger boys to go camping with him. Rick is actually molesting

the boys and when he is found out *years* later, he kills himself with a rifle just before the police arrived to arrest him. The pastor had warned the church board members about Rick, but they did not believe him.

- Linda is the church choir director, skilled in music and a performing pianist. She refuses to work together with the pastor or a worship team and announces that this “ministry” is her own. Linda holds her power by letting everyone know that if she doesn’t get what she wants she will burst out in anger, storm out of the room, and threaten to quit. It has worked well for her for over 10 years, including throwing tantrums right before the worship service where many people could see her.
- Brook leads a women’s Bible study in her home. She is accountable to no one in regard to what she teaches, even though she is a church member and so are most of the women in that study. When the pastor asks her what she is planning to use as study material in the new year, Brook angrily responds “this is my ministry, it has nothing to do with the church, and you can just stay out of it.”

- Gary is regarded as the finest example of Christian fatherhood and husbandry in the whole church. He quotes Bible verses often, teaches a children's class on Sundays, and is constantly inviting people to his home (especially new people in the church). Gary loves to "disciple" people and he can point to numbers of men in the church who he has met with one on one for years. Gary holds a leadership position in the church as well. But Gary is a person the pastor and a few others have never been comfortable around. Gary is very quick to accuse and criticize them, causing them great discouragement. It will be years and years before the full extent of Gary's efforts to destroy the church ministry are exposed and even then he will take his followers with him who believe that Gary has been treated terribly by the church leaders.
- George has enjoyed power and prestige in the church for years. George is the "go to" guy. Most church members view George as the pillar of that church and doubt that it could ever survive without him. George is the board chairman and virtually everything must be approved by

him before it can happen. When George is called on the carpet for his abuse of power and control at the last congregational meeting, George storms out of the board meeting in a rage. Eventually he will do the same thing at the close of a Sunday worship service, unleashing an angry barrage of accusations against the pastor, then exiting the sanctuary after his tantrum.

- Randy came to the church some years back, telling the pastor he was considering suicide and asking for help. The pastor befriended him, but as years went by the pastor noticed some troubling signs in Randy. Randy liked filthy jokes. Randy was a pro at maintaining "believable deniability" which permitted him to say and do things which were inappropriate (most of which had sexual undertones). Ultimately, after being confronted with these things by the pastor and another board member, Randy called a secret meeting in one of the church members' homes to discuss his "concerns" with the church and the pastor.
- One Sunday the pastor visited the young married group's morning class. The leaders, Bob and Angie (husband and wife) were

sitting on opposite sides of the classroom. Bob started off the class by announcing that he had a “confession” to make. Angie, arms crossed, stared at him. It seems that Bob and Angie had had an argument the night before. When the pastor suggested that Bob and Angie should work this matter out between themselves rather than airing it before the entire class, they refused to stop. Others in the class said “yes, this is really good. We need transparency and accountability as Christians.” Church members continued to regard Bob and Angie as model Christians. In fact, they were a couple in bondage to patterns of sin who had no business being in any ministry position in the church.

- Jack and Gail were members of the church. Some years back, Jack had been caught having a homosexual relationship with a man who had AIDS, and who would eventually die from that ailment. Jack and Gail continued to live together in separate bedrooms, and one day announced that they had “led the other man to the Lord and invited him to church” where he sat in the pew together with them. Many regarded this as a fine example of Christian charity.

- Jim and Rhonda were “preeminent Christians” who sacrificially and zealously devoted their money and energies to youth ministry. They had done so for years. When they came to the small church in their new community, everyone was excited and soon the pastor and others were involved helping Jim and Rhonda “reach young people for the Lord.” Soon, it was apparent that in order to work with Jim and Rhonda, everything had to be done as they said. Rhonda in particular would emotionally punish others when she felt they weren’t doing what she said. Rhonda had a fine singing voice and would sing solos at church, but more than once, just before the service, she would let others know that she was “struggling” emotionally and needed them to gather round her for prayer. Years later when the pastor confronted Jim and Rhonda about their pattern of selfishness and control, they would admit no wrong of any kind. Yet anyone who worked with Rhonda in the business that she and Jim owned would readily acknowledge that Rhonda could be a very cruel person.

- Tom is thought to be a wonderful example of a Christian man. If you need something, Tom will be right there for you. Everyone in the church has seen Tom being sooo kind and shepherding to his children. Tom can tell you the answer to most any question or problem you might be facing whether it be a marriage problem or a parenting issue or a financial question, and certainly Tom knows the answer to any Bible question. But in reality, Tom is a wicked man. Tom is a narcissist, in love with himself and demanding the worship of others. This is the Tom that his family lives with behind closed doors. Worse, Tom attracts others just like him to the church.
- John is a local professional man, a member of a number community groups. When John and his wife and children came to the new church plant Pastor Jim had started from a small Bible study conducted for three years, everyone was encouraged. John and his wife had decided that a fresh, community type church was better for them and their family than the more formal denominational one they had been attending.

It wasn't long before John was volunteering to help in any way he could in the church and soon became the church treasurer. One day he met the pastor for lunch and said "I want accountability. I want transparency. I want you to know that I have a drinking problem." Pastor Jim was encouraged that John would be so forthright and honest and thanked him.

But not for long.

Only two weeks later, John was seen by the pastor and several other church members in a public place, drunk. Very drunk. So drunk that other people present noticed. Someone said "take that baby he is holding away from him or he is going to fall and hurt the child."

That was Saturday. The next morning at church, John behaved as if nothing at all had happened.

At the next board meeting, Pastor Jim brought up this incident and said that John needed to be removed from his position as treasurer and called upon to face up to his sin. The other board members, friends of John's, refused. They said "this is a cry for help from a struggling man."

Within six months John was elected to a deacon position in the church. Two months later, John's close friend and board member, Gary, announced at a board meeting that he was dissatisfied with the current sermons the pastor was preaching from 1 Timothy. Gary said he was speaking for the congregation and that "it is this church board's job to see that the people of this church hear sermons they like."

Pastor Jim responded by saying that he was preaching the very same way he always had, teaching what Scripture says, and that no one was going to stop him from doing so.

Within two months, Pastor Jim and his family were moving away, headed to pastor another church far away. Pastor Jim was never able to return to the church he planted out of the labor of many years of teaching Bible studies in a small back room at the local PUD building. Today virtually no one would even know who Pastor Jim is. John? John is still there, a pillar of that church. John loaned the money to the church to build a fine new parsonage and the congregation

has constructed its own very fine church building with all the amenities. John is regarded as a fine, eminent Christian man to whom the church owes everything.

- Pastor Mel has been the pastor of a small church for years. He prides himself in faithful adherence to the London Confession of Faith and Reformed Baptist theology. At first look, Mel appears to be a model pastor, father, and husband. His children can all spout memory verses from Scripture, answer difficult catechisms, and act in public with great politeness and respect for their elders. Mel's wife is a model of "submission" to her husband and even boasts to the ladies in the church and elsewhere that her husband "will not permit her to sin, but sends her to her room when she has a bad attitude." Pastor Mel loves to "disciple" young men. He teaches them theology and how to be a "godly" man and husband, helping them find a young woman to marry.

In reality however, Mel is not what he appears to be. Mel is a narcissist and a very abusive man. He dictates to his wife what clothes she will wear, and most of those clothes are immodest. Mel will tolerate no difference of opinion in his church.

He personally and solely distributes the communion elements, withholding them from those he deems unworthy. Mel will accept no correction from anyone. Those who question anything he does or teaches immediately become the focus of his rage and vengeance.

- Sharon and Wayne are a young couple, Bible school graduates, who have just moved into the community and visit the church. They seem pleased and when the pastor visits them they tell him how much they appreciated the worship service and that they plan to “plug in” to the church. They do so and Sharon becomes active in the music ministry while Wayne is faithfully present at all church gatherings.

But in fact, all is not as it seems. Wayne is addicted to porn. He stays up late at night, long after Sharon goes to bed, searching his computer for new sites. Eventually Wayne leaves Sharon, moves in with another woman, and before the whole sad scenario plays itself out, Wayne’s relatives blame the pastor and church for all Wayne’s troubles.

What is all of this? What do you say? What are these things that destroy so many churches, discourage and defeat so many genuine Christians and pastors?

Most church members and pastors would chalk all of these stories up to:

1. *communication problems*
2. *inter-personal conflict issues*
3. *lack of patience with one another*
4. *Or just some cases of relatively harmless “nut-cases” to laugh at and move on.*

But what I am recommending to you in this sermon series is that these things are anything but mere human shortcomings. They are, in fact, *all examples of very real evil coming in among the people of God with the Satanic and demonic intent of destroying and silencing the people of God and the Word of God. And I propose to you that these kinds of people who do these things while claiming to be Christians, are far more than mere “troubled, difficult” people but are in fact agents of the enemy sent in among us to defame the name of Christ, to stop the proclamation of the gospel, and to hold people in the darkness of sin’s bondage.*

2Co 4:3-4 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. (4) In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

“I, like many who were blessed to have grown up in a loving home, have had a very difficult time accepting the reality of abuse [evil], particularly in Christian homes. Years ago when I was a young pastor in a vibrant church, I was deeply offended when the women’s ministry invited a special speaker to address the topic of domestic violence. Little did I (or anyone else) realize that one of our elders had been beating his wife for years, having put her in the hospital several times, and that at that very time one of our ministers was about to be arrested for felony child abuse. I’ve come to realize that abuse is not the odd exception but is rampant both in the church and in secular society. The evidence for this tragic assertion is overwhelming.”¹

Furthermore, I am proposing to you that as Christ’s people, in possession of God’s Word, we have no excuse for remaining naïve about the true nature of this evil among us. God’s word is a boldface, giant font loudspeaker warning us over and over again:

Act 20:28-31 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. (29) I know that after my

¹ Steven R. Tracy, *Mending the Soul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) location 164, Kindle Edition.

departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; (30) and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. (31) Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

Last month I wrote this short article for our ACFJ Facebook page and asked readers for their comments. I entitled it “Church Can be a Dangerous Place”-

Many of you met your abuser in church because he claimed to be a Christian and even put on a pretty good show of it. Today I was thinking about this some more. I have personally been targeted by abusers in the church more than any other place. And I have not always been a pastor so the fact that I am a pastor does not explain why I was treated with much more fairness and kindness when I was a police officer than when I began to pastor local churches (my present church where I have been pastor for 22 years now is a great place to be - now. It wasn't safe at all two decades ago).

Anyway, what do you all think about my observation that we meet more evil *in the "church"* than in the world? And what I mean

specifically is that the people who I have found to be the most dangerous, the most unsafe, the most abusive, are the "eminently holy saints" who are apparent pillars of their local church, busy greeting people each Sunday, being the "go to" guy or gal, having the "godliest" looking family, etc.?

On the other hand, I feel quite safe and at ease around my neighbor or some of the rough and tumble red-neck types here in our little town. (I don't mean to imply that ALL people who diligently serve the Lord in their local church are these kind of people. But simply that the ones I have been targeted by have ALL been of that genre).

And if this is true, does this not indicate that contemporary evangelical Christianity has in many cases (not all) become sheer Pharisaism, guilty of the very same things that Jesus pronounced woes to the Pharisees for? What, in other words, have we come to in so many churches today and in the lives of so many professing Christians, *that most of the pain in our lives comes from them?* And again, if this is true, does this not largely explain why we have such a hard time presenting the unsaved with the gospel of Christ?

Listen now to some of the responses to that article from Christians who learned about evil in the church *the hard way*:

- the church provides a very safe environment for the abuser. The world doesn't close their eyes as much to evil
- In his book *People of the Lie* M Scott Peck talks about evil people who know church is the best place to hide.
- I think a lack of real preaching of truth that's not easy to hear - doesn't tickle the ears - has led to a watered-down gospel and that alone has many implications, among which (1) providing a safe-for-abusers environment because the sheep aren't fed, (2) dumbing down those who attend, and (3) keeping those out of the church who might otherwise be drawn to truth.

I think your points are all true. It's a comfortable place for abusers to hide - in the church. Generally speaking, today's culture is far more interested in political correctness and being "nice." The church mirrors that

culture; She no longer seems to be 'called out' so much as she 'fits in.' Anything that either rocks the boat or can be accused of not being nice (ie, being a whistleblower on either one's husband or church leadership), well, tsk tsk and finger wag. That disrespectful wife shouldn't be welcomed here. What would they have done with Martin Luther and the reformers? They stood up against the church too.

Christ had things against the churches listed in Revelation. I strongly suspect He has a LOT against the contemporary (so-called) church today. He desires mercy and not sacrifice, but they're too busy counting their sacrifices to think about real mercy, which necessitates judgment at some point. But where is judgment in the church today?

- the church is the target of Ssatan so he does everything he can to make it as far from Christ's as possible, and the churches that insist on ignoring the wiles of the enemy and the enemy in its midst are foolish and being

used by the enemy to do his work- and those individuals will be held accountable.

- It seems to me, both from Scripture and from experience, that there are three kinds of people: 1) those who haven't yet come to Christ, 2) actual believers, 3) and then people who claim to be holy on the outside but are really evil on the inside and behind closed doors. Jesus is extraordinarily gentle, kind, and welcoming to plain old honest sinners in the world, but the guys who pretend to follow God while actually doing evil get the harshest treatment in all of Scripture. He calls them snakes and Christians are instructed not to keep company with them. I think there's certainly something to the idea that it's a special kind of wrong when an evil person poses as a Christian.

Also, sociopaths, narcissists, and other abusive types gravitate towards positions where they can gain power, respect, trust, authority, etc. and it's pretty easy to do that in the church. And maybe it's particularly fun for them to

target deeply empathetic, honorable, godly people-- more sport in tormenting those folks than people who don't care as much about doing right by everyone, loving their enemies, etc.

- Could I add to that, that because in our churches we still think we are only to love people and not call out or stop any sin in anyone else is why most churches are the way they are, safe places for evil to thrive. I know my abuser loved church because his sins were covered up there by numerous pastors.
- Personally, I believe the reason for it lies at the feet of overly naive and too often unwise Christians that make up the majority inside church buildings. They are very unschooled in the nature of evil, and mostly unwilling to see it when it presents itself, instead bending over backwards to give the benefit of the doubt where, really, often none is warranted.

Church people spend a great deal of time trying to hide from one another who they really are, and therefore aren't

paying much discerning attention to the rest of everybody else around them.

We also accept our expectations that "the world" will be the world outside of church doors, but we forget that just walking through the doors doesn't automatically and immediately absolve us of our sinful natures or overnight change us into spiritually mature Christ followers.

It has been my experience having grown up in Christendom from a young age that it sorely lacks in wisdom, and sorely lacks in humility.

- I am glad you've brought this up. My ex-husband (grandson of missionaries, Christian college prayer group leader when I met him) loved to point out the wolves in sheep's clothing, and he was such a convincing/big talker I failed to recognize for a decade that HE was the wolf in sheep's clothing. I've been a Christian for 26 years and have heard TWO sermons pointing out that not every professing Christian is a believer. This

needs to come from the pulpit much more often.

- I think many evangelical churches are extremely dangerous. I think they actually create abusers. They teach people that you can do anything and it will always be forgiven. They mistake a person's greed for power as leadership potential. They show abusers that if you hurt someone the victim will never be heard. They are more willingly to hear lies than the truth. Outside appearances mean everything. All they really have is delusion. It's all centered on feeling good about themselves and never ever about worshiping the God of the bible. They are far too proud to have ever recognized their own wickedness and need for Christ. They just think Jesus likes them better than everyone else because they are such good and deserving people. They think of themselves as saints and even angels, but get on the wrong side of them and they are like venomous snakes.
- met my ex-husband in church too... it makes me sad that

God's name gets tarnished with abusers... and I hope so strongly that we can find better ways to educate (especially women) about what to look out for, and what to never accept from a wolf

Please notice very carefully that these comments are not coming from people who hate Christ or His true church. These are Christians speaking. These are your sisters and brothers in Christ talking. And there are lots of them. LOTS of them with these very same true stories. These are people who found that their local church was a dangerous place and it was in their church that evil attacked them. And *it was in these churches that the existence of that evil was denied.*

And yet, mark this down very well, in NO seminary of the Christian church where the shepherds of Christ's church are largely trained, will you find any training provided on this subject that will in fact be the very weapon the enemy is going to surely use against any true church, any true pastor, any true Christian. None. *Evil is not on our radar.* Especially, evil in the church among the sheep. And we have no excuse for this ignorance. It is a willful blindness.

It is our purpose in this series of sermons, *Wise as Serpents*, to remind ourselves and to demonstrate to others

that the Word of God is packed full of truth and warnings on this subject of evil, and specifically how that evil will most certainly creep in among us unnoticed, in disguise, cloaked in darkness, intent on extinguishing the light of God's Word.

Christ commands and calls us to be as wise as serpents in regard to this evil and its tactics, yet to be as innocent as doves in respect to participating in it ourselves. We must see it for what it is, recognize it when it comes, know its tactics, and stand firm against it. This is the real practice of putting on the Armor of God and standing firm against the devil so that he flees.

Jud 1:3-4 Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. (4) For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Jud 1:12-13 These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; (13)

wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.

And yet, as we heard recently from a woman who works with a secular agency which works with the police to advocate for victims of pedophiles:

"I have been in many court rooms in which a church member or leader is appearing, having been charged with molesting or assaulting someone, usually a child or a woman, in the church. And, especially if the person charged is some 'notable' figure in the church such as a pastor, the courtroom is consistently PACKED full with church members there to support the suspect. I have NEVER seen a courtroom packed full of people there to support the victim of such a crime. Never."

Now I ask you to consider these things very, very carefully. That is the testimony of a person from outside the church, from the secular world, honestly describing what really happens when evil is found in a local church. What message is that sounding loudly and clearly to everyone about the gospel, about Christ, and about what claims to be Christ's church? Here is God's Word and command to us in dealing with such people:

Pro 28:17 If one is burdened with the blood of another, he will be a fugitive until death; let no one help him.

Proverbs 28:17 (NASB) A man who is laden with the guilt of human blood Will be a fugitive until death; let no one support him.

Proverbs 28:17 (RSV) If a man is burdened with the blood of another, let him be a fugitive until death; let no one help him.

And yet in most cases today Christians ARE helping the wicked and in doing so flagrantly disobeying our Lord's command.

I do not want to be guilty of these things. I don't think you do either.

Psa 23:4-5 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. (5) You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.