

Sheep Among Wolves
Matthew 10:16-23

Introduction

Even with the economic downturn of the last seven years, Americans enjoy being prosperous. They enjoy the things that their money can buy. They enjoy being able to have a life of ease. There is nothing wrong with that in itself for even Solomon commented in Ecclesiastes 5:18, *“Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one’s labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward.”* It is a wonderful thing to be prosperous and I certainly do not want to condemn prosperity. However, there are some dangers associated with prosperity.

First, prosperity comes as the result of hard work and self control as Proverbs 10:4 states, *“Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.”* However, if you think that a life of ease is an inherent right, then you will demand that someone else provide it for you. That is the intrinsic problem of socialism that has infected our nation. There are a lot of people that believe they deserve economic well being at the expense of those who are working, and they are happy to use government power to force that to happen.

A second danger faces those who make prosperity their goal in life. When that happens, then greed can quickly take over leading to all sorts of problems even as expressed in 1 Timothy 6:10, *“For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”*

A third danger faces those who have grown up in prosperity and have become complacent in it resulting in an unwillingness to make the personal sacrifices needed for long-term prosperity to continue. Their perspective becomes myopic focusing on having enough funds to continue their current lifestyle in the near future without concern for the distant future or its effect on others.

These economic dangers have spiritual corollaries. We have grown up in a nation that was prosperous not only economically, but spiritually as well. This nation has a rich and wonderful Christian heritage, but it has turned its back on it. At one time there was a very high degree of Biblical literacy in America with Biblical phrases and imagery lacing common speech, but now the level of Biblical ignorance even among Christians is staggering. There are fewer churches holding up the Bible as the word of God and even fewer that explain its meaning in its context. Christian publications and media ministries still abound, but since it is easier to read or talk about the Bible than actually study the Bible, there has been a phenomenal amount of theological nonsense accepted as truth from the mouths and pens of a proliferation of false teachers.

Without knowledge of the Bible and pursuit of the godliness described in it, religion replaces Christianity. Business ethics decline because the desire to make another dollar is greater than the desire to do what is right. In a similar way, Churches that desire being popular and wealthy more than being Biblical and holy will compromise what they teach and adjust what they do in order to attract those who want religion and the world. Marketing techniques guide them instead of the Scriptures. The result has been a proliferation of professing Christians who have few Biblically sound convictions and may in fact have convictions that are in direct opposition to the Scriptures. That is why it is easy to find people who claim to be followers of Christ and yet they are supportive of things such as abortion, fornication, homosexuality, recreational use of drugs, immorality in entertainment and often have very foul mouths themselves. Compromise of Biblical integrity results in man centered religious philosophy directing beliefs and actions instead of the Scriptures. Religion replaces Christianity.

My point in all of this? Simply this. The text we will be examining for the next couple of weeks describes Christianity in a way that has for the most part been lost in America. Yes, there are many that still understand Biblical Christianity, but it is few in comparison with previous generations. If being a Christian means to be a “*little Christ*” - which is its literal meaning - then it also means to do what Jesus says. Matthew 10 contains Jesus’ instructions to the apostles when He first sent them out to proclaim the message that *the kingdom of heaven was at hand* (vs. 7). As we saw last week, many of these instructions are specific to the apostles at a specific time, but they also contain principles of ministry that we are to carry out in our own time.

Last week we examined the principles of ministry set forth in Matthew 10:5-15. There needs to be a focus in ministry. The message must be clear. We are to live a life of ministry with a heart that trusts the Lord. We must be careful to make sure that we concentrate our time and effort on those who respond. We are to depart from those who reject God’s message. This week we will examine Jesus’ warnings to the Apostles concerning the dangers they faced as they went out.

The Principle, Matthew 10:16

The general principle is found in verse 16, “*Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves.*” Jesus had previously described the multitudes as sheep who needed shepherds (9:36), so it would be expected that Jesus would tell the apostles that the people would be ready and receive them as shepherds among sheep. Instead, there is an opposite statement of warning. The Apostles would be the sheep going out into the midst of wolves. At first glance this seems like a ridiculous statement and something unloving and unkind if true. How could Jesus, the chief shepherd, send His sheep out to the wolves instead of protecting them? What could this statement possibly mean?

Simply put, it is a very graphic description of the rejection that they should expect to receive at the hands of the world while at the same time describing the nature of the relationship they were to have with Christ. Sheep are one of the most dependent and helpless of all domesticated animals, and sometimes they also show a keen lack of intelligence. A shepherd has quite a job in just keeping them alive and healthy in addition to providing protection from predators. Philip Keller, who was a shepherd for many years in Canada, describes sheep well in his book, *A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm*. Their indiscriminate eating habits means they have to be protected from eating poisonous plants. They are very vulnerable to extreme weather, infections and disease and so must be sheltered and checked regularly for cuts and disease symptoms. They can be frightened by things that are harmless. They have been known to kill themselves by hitting their heads against rocks due to the irritation caused by flies buzzing around their heads. Their only defense is running away, which they do not do well, and in a panic a pregnant ewe cannot only lose the lamb, but also die herself from exhaustion.

The Apostles and we (in other passages) are described as sheep. That may not be flattering, but it is accurate. Our lives are dependant upon the shepherd. We often do not know enough to do what is right and we cannot protect ourselves. We rely on the shepherd to lead us and protect us. If the apostles were to survive among the wolves of the world, then they must rely upon Jesus.

Those that would seek to destroy the Christian are often described in the Scriptures as “*wolves.*” In Matthew 7:15 Jesus described the false prophets as “*ravenous wolves.*” In Acts 20:29 Paul warned the Ephesian elders against “*savage wolves*” that would arise from among them and not spare the flock but speak perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves.

Why does Jesus, the Good Shepherd, send defenseless sheep out into this ungodly world among the wolves? Because that is where He can use them best in their service for Him. They will have to trust Him as they go. The Shepherd knows what He is doing and the purpose He has for each sheep. In John 10 Jesus specifically claims that no one can take away any of the sheep the Father has given Him.

This promise does not mean the sheep will not be persecuted, tormented and even killed, but it does mean that Jesus will gather each one to Himself in heaven and give to them eternal life. The sheep are subject to persecution, torment and martyrdom because the Shepherd, who is also the *“lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”* was persecuted, tormented and martyred by the world. The Scriptures are clear that those who live godly lives will be persecuted. Jesus said it many times (Matthew 5:10-12; 23:24; 24:9; John 16:33). Paul stated this directly in 2 Timothy 3:12, and it is a theme in both of Peter’s epistles. The world hated Jesus and so it will hate His followers (John 15:18-21).

Jesus warns the Apostles that they will face serious opposition. They will be sheep among wolves. Jesus warning here is specific to the apostles, but it is clear that it also applies to us since the principle is repeated in so many other places as a general truth to all Christians. Yet, this truth is very seldom included when people are told the gospel, and it is very seldom mentioned from the pulpits across our nation. Why? Simply because it does not match what people want to hear. People want to hear about health, wealth and prosperity so they flock to the churches that have a preacher that will tickle their ears with good tiding and avoid the harsh realities of truth (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Sin and suffering are not popular topics, but they are reality. People pursue happiness because it fits their personal desires, but the joy of following Christ begins with the humility of turning from personal desire to submitting to God. It involves being convicted of your sinfulness and its condemnation and finding forgiveness in God’s grace as faith is placed in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. That joy continues as self will is yielded to God’s will and the Christian comes to *know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death* (Philippians 3:10).

After the retreat from Dunkirk in 1940, Sir Winston Churchill told his fellow Englishmen that *“All I can offer you is blood, sweat and tears.”* If such a call can be made to sacrifice for love of country, how can the call be any less for the love of Christ in the Spiritual Warfare we are in?

And what should be our attitude in the midst of these wolves? We are to be *“as shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.”*

Serpents were a symbol of wisdom. They were considered very crafty, smart, cunning and cautious animals. The idea of being *“innocent as doves”* speaks of being pure and true to God’s word and His will. The two combined together give us the idea of being wise with a sanctified sense of saying the right thing at the right time and place and discovering the best means to achieve the highest goal. This is a characteristic that is to be developed by every Christian. Colossians 4:5 commands, *“Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity.”*

We are to be uncompromising in proclaiming God’s truth, but that does not mean being abrasive, inconsiderate, belligerent, hostile, or rude. Wise and innocent, cunning and gentle, perceptive and pure - these describe discretion.

Paul was as uncompromising as anyone when it came to the Scriptures, yet he knew how to talk with people about the gospel without unnecessary offense to Jews or Greeks, weak or strong, slave or free, He *“became all things to all men, that [he] might by all means save some”* (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). We see the same characteristic in David in his relationship with King Saul, and in Mordecai as he responded to arrogant Haman, and also in Abigail, whom scripture describes as *“a woman of good understanding and discretion,”* as she put up with her foolish husband.

It is not brave or wise or spiritual or loving to needlessly incite anger or trouble. The Proverbs tells us that *“a soft answer turns away wrath,”* and Paul instructs us in 1 Corinthians 4:12-13 to follow the Lord’s example, *“when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate.”* It does not matter what people think of us, but it does matter what they think of Christ whom we represent. Humility goes a long way in doing that.

Much too often needless trouble is caused by a lack of discretion. There should be no surprise that people respond defensively or aggressively when things are said that are antagonistic or condemning, and you cannot major on minor things and expect a good response.

Care must be given even in trying to help someone who needs it. We are to speak the truth, but it must also be done with love (Ephesians 4:15). It may be true that an alcoholic is “a drunken bum who is going to hell,” but there are many other ways to say the same thing with loving compassion. For example, “*sir, it is obvious that alcohol has taken over your life, and even more important, it is keeping you from Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior. He has a much better life for you which has purpose and hope that will end in heaven and not in hell. Would you let me help?*” We are to be as shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves in our responses to others - even when they persecute us.

In the rest of this section Jesus warns His apostles about four areas in which they would find wolves. Persecution would come at the hands of religion, government, family and society.

Wolves in Religion - Matthew 10:17

“*But beware of men; for they will deliver you up to the courts, and scourge you in their synagogues.*” The ultimate force behind the persecution of the righteous is Satan, but the persecution itself comes through the hands of men. For that reason Jesus warned them to beware of men, that is, they were not to naively entrust themselves to them or make them angry without good cause. This is a general principle that applies to us as well. We must be careful of men and the traps they may lay for us. We are to make sure that we live in a manner that gives no valid grounds for a charge against us (1 Peter 2:12; 3:13-17).

The first type of men to beware of are religious. The courts spoken of here are the Jewish courts (remember, the apostles at this time were to go only to the Jews). Even under Rome, the Jews were allowed to settle most disputes among themselves including civil issues. The synagogue was not only the gathering place for worship, it was often also the court room. A Jew accused of breaking the Mosaic law or a rabbinic tradition would be brought before judges who would decide the case, determine the sentence and deliver the punishment. The common practice was that one judge would call out the sentence and another would announce the punishment. A court official would then do the scourging while others would call out the blows. There is also evidence that parts of the Torah were read or Psalms were sung during the scourging. The scourging itself was done with a stick that had leather thongs attached to the end. Some would also have bits of metal or rocks tied to the end of the leather thongs. Mosaic law allowed a maximum of 40 blows, so the punishment was often limited to 39 blows in order to make sure the Mosaic Law was not broken in case someone miscounted.

Saul of Tarsus was such a religious man that was persecuting Christians. Later, when he became the Apostle Paul, he was at the receiving end of the scourge. In 2 Corinthians 11:24 he recounts being scourged by the Jews on five different occasions in the same fashion that he used to imprison and beat Christians before his conversion.

The apostles experienced the specifics of this warning, but it is a general warning that applies to all believers for throughout history religion has persecuted true Christianity. Judaism was the major persecutor up until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. After that and through the third century the chief cause was Roman emperor worship. Christians have commonly been persecuted whenever and wherever other religions such as paganism, Hinduism and Islam have become dominate. Even religions that are supposedly “Christian” have been major sources of persecution. For example, the majority of the cases of martyrdom cited in *Foxes Book Of Martyrs* were those killed by the Roman Catholic church during the counter reformation in the 1500's. There are tares among the wheat, so there are also wolves within the church and there is trouble when one gets into a position of authority. Paul warned the Ephesian elders about this in Acts 20 and John specifically cites Diotrephes in 1 John 1:9-10. We too must beware of the wolves in religions.

Wolves in Government - Matthew:10:18-20

Jesus continued his warning, “*and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My*

sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak. for it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.”

Herod Agrippa I and many of the other government leaders mentioned in the New Testament were certainly such wolves. In Acts 12 we are told that Herod Agrippa I “laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them.” And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.”

The apostles experienced the specifics of this warning, but it is also a general principle that applies to all Christians. Religions persecute Christians because of the competition. They have no tolerance for a competing faith that claims to be the only way to God. Persecution by governments comes because the world hates Christ. Dictatorial states hate Christ because He shifts allegiance from the state to Himself. This is why atheistic communism has already murdered multiple millions of Christians. Other governments are out to please their people, and because they are offended by the righteous lives of believers, the government joins in the persecution. That is the reason such persecution can exist in democracies including those that are supposed to guarantee freedom of religion.

It must also be recognized that there are demonic influences in government. Demons are mentioned specifically or alluded to in Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Ephesians. What else could explain the evil we find in Esther when wicked Haman convinced the king to allow the annihilation of all the Jews who were and remain God’s chosen people? A more recent example of this was the rise of Adolph Hitler who not only mass murdered millions of Jews but also countless Christians who did not acquiesce to Hitler’s dictates and instead continued to proclaim God’s word and behave righteously.

I found a sobering quote by John MacArthur made over 30 years ago, “When its citizens turn away from the Lord and His standard, even the freest and most democratic governments, including our own United States, will eventually inhibit the free expression and practice of the Christian faith in hostility to Christ and His Word.” This has been a problem for some time, but it has become much more severe as the tide of the homosexual agenda has flooded our land the last few years.

However, in the midst of such persecution, we do not need to worry about what to say. The promise here of God giving them what they should say is specific to the apostles, however, throughout history we find that the Holy Spirit has been graciousness in supplying believers with what to say when called upon to give testimony in the midst of persecution. Many of the most memorable and powerful testimonies were given spontaneously just before a martyr was put to death. An example of this is Polycarp in the second century who was told he would be set free if he reviled Christ and gave allegiance to Caesar, he replied, “I have served Him 86 years and in no way has he dealt unjustly with me; so how can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”

Wolves in the Family - Matthew 10:21

“And 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. “ This statement rises from the Old Testament for Micah 7:6 says, “a man’s enemies will be the members of his household.” Jesus said the same thing as general statements in other passages (Mark 13:12; Luke 12:51-53, 21:16-17) demonstrating the strength of the hatred people have for God.

It is one thing to suffer at the hands of an unjust government or a false religion, it is another to have the persecution arise from within your own family, yet there is danger of wolves even from among those who are related by blood. Someone has said that there are only two things stronger than natural love; one is born of hell and the other is born of heaven. This has been true throughout the ages and it will continue to be true.

Wolves in Society - Matthew 10:22

We need to beware of wolves in religion, in government, in our families and in society in general. *“And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.”* This does not mean that every person will hate you, but that all people in general will hate you. There are people from every nationality, every class, and every walk of life that hate God and anyone that reflects Him. That can add up to a lot of pressure on a believer to become like them, but the true mark of Christianity is conformity to Christ and not the world (Romans 12:1-2).

This idea of enduring to the end is seen throughout the New Testament being mentioned in Matthew 24:13; Romans 2:7; Colossians 1:21-23; Hebrews 3:14; James 1:12; and Revelation 2:7,10, 17, 26: 3:21. We call it the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. It is not that salvation comes by persevering, but that those that are saved will persevere and so demonstrate their salvation. And since it is the Good Shepherd that is with us in the midst of the wolves, then the outcome is sure. Those that are His sheep will not be lost.

The Defense & Hope - Matthew 10:23

Verse 23 gives both the defense against persecution and the hope in overcoming it. It is both a specific command given to the apostles and a general principle for all Christians, *“But whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next.”*

The defense is simple - leave. Just as we are not to purposely provoke animosity and ridicule, we are not to stay in the midst of persecution if it is possible to leave. There are no extra jewels in our crowns for being stubborn. The Apostle Paul gives a good example of the balance. We do not find him trying to purposely stir things up as he went from city to city. Instead, as he preached the gospel, some people responded in faith and others got stirred up in opposition resulting in persecution which he would endure until it significantly hindered his work and then he would go to the next town. Even so, he was beaten, scourged and even stoned and left for dead. Paul did not seek persecution out, but when it came, he neither fearfully shrank from it nor did he stay after it had arisen. Neither should we.

The apostles were also given a hope, *“for truly I say to you, you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes.”* They would be sheep among wolves, but they would be sustained for the job. Persecution would come, but they would be able to endure it. They would still be busy going through Israel when the Son of Man would come. Matthew 16:28 uses the same phrase to refer to the transfiguration in Matthew 17, so that is also the meaning of the reference here. The apostles would not have finished carrying out their initial assignment of proclaiming to all of Israel that the *“kingdom of heaven was at hand”* before Jesus would be revealed in his glory.

There is a similar promise to us. Persecution will arise against those who follow Christ, but it will not be constant for it was not even for the Apostles, but what is more important, Jesus will enable us to endure it. He said that *“in this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33). He also promised that He would be with us *“always, even to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20). He will not forsake us or leave us (Hebrews 13:5).

In a few moments we will be observing the Lord’s Table. Jesus suffered persecution, torture and death to free you from your sins. What are you willing to suffer for Him as one of His sheep out in the midst of wolves proclaiming the gospel of His kingdom?

Sermon Notes: *Sheep Among Wolves*
Matthew 10:16-23

Introduction

It is good to be prosperous - Ecclesiastes 5:18 - but there are some _____ that come with it

Those who believe prosperity is an inherent right _____ it from others without working themselves

Those who believe prosperity is the goal in life easily fall into _____ and its associated evils

Complacency in prosperity diminishes what is needed to keep it - _____ term goals replace long term ones

Spiritual prosperity _____ when people turn their backs on what is needed to keep it

Without knowledge of the Bible and pursuit of the godliness described in it, _____ replaces Christianity

The instructions in our text are specific to the Apostles, but their _____ apply to all Christians

The Principle, Matthew 10:16 - sent as sheep in the midst of wolves

Sheep are domesticated animals that in many ways are very _____ and helpless

Christians are _____ sheep - dependent on the Lord for provision and protection

Wolves are dangerous _____ upon sheep - Matthew 7:15; Acts 20:29

Jesus loses _____ of His sheep (John 10), but they are subject to experience the opposition He experienced

The world hates Christians because it hates _____ - we will face serious opposition from the world

Our _____ is founded in knowing the Lord & yielding to His will even when it is the fellowship of suffering

Serpents were symbols of _____ and doves were symbols of being pure and true

A Christian is to develop _____ - wise & innocent, cunning & gentle, perceptive & pure

We are to proclaim the gospel without compromise, yet without _____ offense - 1 Cor. 9:19-22

We speak the truth, but we do so in _____ and with compassion and humility - 1 Cor. 4:12-13

Wolves in Religion - Matthew 10:17

_____ is the ultimate force behind persecution of Christians, but he uses men, so beware

Even under Roman rule, _____ courts settled most disputes and could punish - including scourging

The apostles experienced the specifics of this warning from _____ persecution

The principle applies to all Christians who have suffered at the hands of other _____ and false Christians

Wolves in Government - Matthew:10:18-20

The apostles experienced the specifics of this warning under _____ persecution starting in Acts 12

The principle applies to all Christians who have suffered at the hands of _____ entities

Governments hate Christians due to their priority of allegiance to Christ, but also due to _____ influence

In the midst of persecution, we can rely on God's _____ to enable us to respond in a godly manner

Wolves in the Family - Matthew 10:21

Jesus gives the same warning in _____ statements in other passages - Mark 13:12; Luke 12:51-53, 21:16-17

The danger of wolves among _____ members is real and very common.

Wolves in Society - Matthew 10:22

This does not mean that every person will hate you, but that all people in _____ will hate you

Enduring to the end is a common theme in Scripture - God enables the _____ to persevere

The Defense & Hope - Matthew 10:23

The defense is simple - _____. We do not seek persecution, nor shrink from it, nor stay in it unnecessarily

The apostles were _____ that they would be sustained for the job though sent as sheep among wolves

We have similar _____: Jesus has overcome the world; He will be with us always; He will not forsake us

KIDS KORNER

Parents, you are responsible to apply God's Word to your children's lives. Here is some help.

Young Children - draw a picture about something you hear during the sermon. Explain your picture(s) to your parents at lunch. **Older Children** - Do one or more of the following: 1) Count how many times a reference is made to persecution. 2) Discuss with your parents how God enables His people to endure suffering.

THINK ABOUT IT!

Questions to consider in discussing the sermon with others. What are the benefits of economic prosperity? Why are each of the following a threat to prosperity: 1) Believing it is a right. 2) Thinking it is the goal of life. 3) Being complacent in it. Americans have a rich and wonderful Christian heritage, so why is Christianity declining in the United States? What is the danger of Biblical illiteracy? What is the danger of desiring popularity and wealth over knowledge of God and holiness? - to a church? - to an individual? To whom was Jesus specifically instructing in Matthew 10? Can those instructions be applied to Christians today? Explain. What is the nature of a sheep? Why is a sheep a good metaphor for a Christian? What is the symbolic meaning of "wolves" in Matthew 10:16? Jesus gave many warnings that Christians would suffer for following Him - why then is that subject so seldom spoken about in most American churches? How can a Christian have joy even when being persecuted? What are the symbolic meanings of serpents and doves in Matthew 10:16? How does the life of the apostle Paul demonstrate being as wise as a serpent and as innocent as a dove? How can you demonstrate this principle in your own life? Why did Judaism persecute early Christianity? In what ways did the apostles suffering from this persecution? What religions have been major persecutors of Christians in the past? In the present? How were early Christians persecuted by the Roman government? Why? What governments in the past have persecuted Christians? What governments in the present are persecuting Christians? In what ways have you seen / heard of persecution of Christians rising in the United States? Should we fear such persecution? Why or why not? Do you know anyone that has suffered persecution for being a Christian from his / her own family? Explain. Why would that happen? Why does persecution arise against Christians from every nationality, every class of society, every walk of life? What is the importance of enduring to the end? How is a Christian able to endure? Should a Christian seek to be persecuted? Why or why not? How should a Christian respond when persecuted? Should a Christian willingly stay in circumstances in which he is persecuted? Explain. What promises has Jesus given to His followers that will comfort them when they are persecuted?