

Matthew 10:16

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-10/matthew-1016/>

Jesus gives two powerful metaphors to help His disciples understand their mission. The first is a warning. The second is an admonition.

The parallel gospel account of this teaching is found in Luke 10:3.

Jesus wants His disciples to be sober about what they are to do. He wants them to know the risks and how to best manage them. He says *Behold* to draw their attention to what He is about to tell them. He shares two short metaphors that depict the dangers and the tactic of their mission.

I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Jesus is sending His disciples into *the midst of* danger. He sends His disciples as though they were *sheep*. *Sheep* were common symbols for innocence and helplessness. In this metaphor the notion of being a symbol for being defenseless makes the most sense. For these *sheep* are being sent *in the midst of wolves*. *Wolves* are symbolic for being ravenous and cruel. *Wolves* operate in packs to hunt down and surround their prey. They are the natural predators of *sheep*, who are helpless against their attacks. The only thing that protects *sheep* from *wolves* is their numbers (they aren't all killed and eaten at once) and their shepherd, who in addition to leading them to green pastures and waters, also wards off attacks from animals like *wolves*.

Jesus is telling His disciples that they are like the helpless *sheep* and *the wolves* are the men who will plot to arrest and kill them in order to stop the gospel message from threatening their power. As the disciples are sent out in midst of danger, Jesus tells them that God is unlikely to intervene in such a way that He protects them from all physical and social abuse or harm. The pain they face is real.

Jesus then uses a different metaphor to help them manage the risk of those hazards. In light of the danger they are entering, they must be *shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves*. *Serpents* are often associated with evil. And for good reason. Satan took the form of a serpent when he tempted Eve to disobey God in the Garden of Eden. But in addition to being seen as evil, *serpents* were also seen as being subtle, cunning, crafty, and *shrewd*: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made” (Genesis 3:1).

Being *shrewd* is a virtue when applied properly. When Jesus tells His disciples to be *shrewd as serpents* He clarifies this by the follow-up phrase, *and innocent as doves*. This might include not taking unnecessary risks or unwisely exposing vulnerabilities when they are better avoided. Jesus will soon warn the disciples not to entrust themselves to the authorities.

Serpents rarely overpower their prey by a show of force. More often they creep in close to their victims and take them by the element of surprise. Shrewdness is practical wisdom and is the opposite of foolish behavior. But shrewdness can be abused, like any other finite good, to take

advantage of others when and where they least expect it. When people are *shrewd* in this manner, they are sinning.

The Apostle Paul described the serpent's shrewdness as being "crafty":

"But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ." (2 Corinthians 11:3-4)

In Luke 20, Jesus perceived the "craftiness" (same word as in 2 Corinthians 11:3-4—"panourgia") of His enemies who tried to trap Him by asking Him if Jews should pay taxes to the Romans. The Jewish leaders had done "opposition research" through "trackers" who had followed Jesus, and had devised this question as a way to trap Jesus. If He answered "yes" then Jesus would lose the support of the people, who believed it to be idolatry to pay taxes to Rome. And if Jesus answered "no" the leaders could turn Him in to the Romans as an insurrectionist and get Him killed (which was their primary aim).

Jesus was even craftier than they. He refused to answer their question. Rather, Jesus "swatted aside" their framing and offered an alternative framing, asking them whose inscription was on Roman money, then stating that they ought to render to man what is man's due, and to God what is God's due. In doing this, Jesus demonstrated this principle of being *shrewd* while remaining *innocent*.

Doves are symbols of *innocence*. Even as His disciples are to *be shrewd as serpents* by taking advantage of the worldly institutions to accomplish their mission, they are to do so with utmost integrity. They are to maintain their mission focus to serve others, rather than to be self-seeking. The demonstration by Jesus of this principle in the "show Me a coin" episode in Luke 20 shows that Jesus desires His disciples to have the capability to understand how to win arguments by *shrewd* framing of issues and questions. However, He expects them to apply this skill to advance good rather than to cash in for themselves. Being *innocent as doves* includes maintaining a focus on giving blessings freely to those to whom they are ministering rather than seeking monetary returns for themselves.

Biblical Text

Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.