

Missionary Qualities for Every Christian *'Innocently Wise'*

Passages: Romans 16:17-20
Matthew 10:16-25

Today's passage obviously deals with conflict...persecution. Indeed, *the very first verse of today's passage* pretty much summarises the rest! In verse 16, Jesus tells His newly appointed Apostles: ***"I am sending you out as sheep among wolves."*** Great news, huh? I mean, the wolf is known as a ferocious, cunning, and fierce animal. A wolf stops at nothing to get its prey. Sheep, on the other hand, are weak, witless, and extremely docile. In the presence of wolves, sheep have, in themselves, no effective means of defence.

And so, it's clear what Jesus' point is! These new apostles will be in danger wherever they go. Whether within Israel or throughout the Roman Empire, they will be hunted down by hostile powers. And like sheep against wolves, they will have nothing in themselves with which they can fight back.

And yet, despite this gloomy prospect, Jesus still has some words of advice. In the same breath, He tells them, ***"Therefore, be shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves."***

What does it mean to be *"as shrewd as a snake"*? The Greek word that is translated here in the NIV as ***"shrewd"*** ('phronimos') could better be translated as "prudence", "caution" or "discernment". In the ancient world, the "snake" was widely regarded for its keen sense of perception. It could easily avoid its enemies... or at least keep its enemy at bay. To be *"shrewd as snakes"*, therefore, clearly refers to the way the disciples needed to avoid all unnecessary contact or conflict with the "wolves". They would need to examine each situation and respond prudently. They must never invite or provoke attacks from their enemies, but rather behave in a way that would disarm the wicked schemes levelled against them.

Of course, Jesus set the example in how this was to be done! Throughout his ministry, He never intentionally provoked conflicts with His enemies, unless it was absolutely necessary. (That's one of the reasons why He often told people not to tell anyone of their healing. He wasn't keen to stir up trouble!) When opposition to his ministry did increase, he often left the area for a time to let things cool down. He knew how to answer His critics in a way that was

disarming, while, at the same time, He could expose their folly. (A classic example of this is found in Matthew 21, when the Chief priests and the elders demanded that Jesus reveal by what authority He rode triumphantly into Jerusalem. By answering their question with another question about the authority of John the Baptist, he quickly bamboozled His opponents and defused the situation.)

And so, in practical terms, for the apostles to be ***as shrewd as snakes*** would involve things like;

- a. Staying as far away from Jerusalem as possible!
- b. Avoiding contact with Pharisees and other religious leaders.
- c. Hanging out with the poor, the powerless and the rejected...the people who wouldn't be hostile to the message of the Gospel.
- d. Keeping the reputation of Jesus hushed. *"Don't tell anyone."*

That's just a sample of what it would mean for them to be ***"as shrewd as snakes"***!

But, of course, in the task of sharing the Gospel with the people of Israel, Jesus also wanted His 12 apostles to be ***"harmless as doves."*** The Greek word translated "harmless" literally means "unmixed". (Most often, it was used to refer to things such as *pure* gold or *unmixed* wine.) In the New Testament, it became a metaphor for moral integrity and purity. (That makes sense, considering that, in the ancient Near East, the dove was a symbol of purity and faithfulness. It was the only bird in the Old Testament that could be offered as a sacrifice. The dove was also the symbol of peace and reconciliation.)

By encouraging His apostles to be ***"as harmless as doves"***, Jesus wanted them to be known as men of integrity and moral purity... in both their conduct and their speech. Although they needed to be ***"shrewd"*** in dealing with their adversaries, they must never compromise their ethics. Any sin in the life and speech of Jesus' apostles would only serve to discredit and neutralize their witness.

Of course, Jesus was ***harmless as a dove!*** That's why He could challenge his enemies by asking, ***"Which of you accuses me of sin?"*** (Jn. 8:46). Indeed, the people who hated him could never find anything in his life to discredit him. And so, they attacked His teaching; or they made absurd charges against Him that he broke the law by doing good, or that he performed miracles by the power of Satan. Still, like a dove, Jesus was peaceful and never retaliated.

This was the way in which the Apostles were meant to follow. To be “**as harmless as doves**” would mean that **the Apostles would have to:**

- a. Avoid arguing over insignificant issues, like paying the Temple tax. Just pay it and be done with it.
- b. Shake the dust of their feet and move on whenever their message was rejected. (verse 14) In verse 23, Jesus goes on to tell them, “**When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another...**”
- c. Not let the ‘powers-that-be’ draw them into their underhanded schemes. (Sadly, Judas couldn’t resist)
- d. Not work out beforehand what they would say, but depend on the Holy Spirit to speak for them and through them. (verse 20)

That’s what it would mean for them to be “**as harmless as doves.**”

Now, let me ask you: **Are these same words of advice that Jesus gave to His 12 Apostles applicable to us, today?**

NT Wright tells the following story to which we will probably all relate:

“A few years ago, I was having coffee with a friend in a café at my local beach. I was explaining to him what our church was doing to promote Christ among the residents of the area. At one point, I noticed a woman a few tables away looking inquisitively at me. I assumed she was a fellow Christian interested in listening into our conversation. I just kept on talking. A few minutes later, the woman got up from her table, paid her bill, walked straight across to me and, at what seemed like the top of her voice, said: “*So, you want to convert the world. How dare you!*” And off she stormed... I was dumbfounded. And for a moment, I even wondered: “*Maybe we’re being presumptuous. Perhaps promoting the news about Christ is the stuff of fanaticism rather than a reasoned, modern faith.*”

We all know that today’s world is increasingly hostile, not so much to Christianity as a religion (you still have freedom to believe whatever you like) but, specifically to the idea of **Christian evangelism**. People don’t like the idea that we want to see the world converted; we want all people to know Jesus as their Lord and Saviour! **Evangelism** is where the potential for a hostile reaction is on the increase.

Now, for many of us, the solution is to simply stop evangelising! *“Sure, we’ll keep the doors of the church open for anyone who wants to come to us, but let’s stop going out to them—it’s too much trouble; there’s just too much conflict!”*

I’m sorry, but this was never Jesus’ intention. The advice that Jesus gave to His first missionaries is still the same advice for us today: ***“I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. Therefore, be shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves.”***

Yes, we are called to evangelise; but we must do it in a specific way:

Like snakes, we must detect and avoid danger. We must pull back from confrontation, never seeking to provoke attacks or to stir up trouble. In practical terms, **this will involve...**

- a. **avoiding all forms of arrogance.** No one wants to feel intimidated or ‘spoken down to’, nor do they want things rammed down their throats.
- b. **being calm when under pressure.** Don’t let the actions or taunts of others make you over-react. It helps if you can keep in mind the fact that there is a huge *worldview gap* that separates us from non-Christian people. Keep remembering that people don’t see life from the same perspective as you do. It’s therefore best to keep clarifying any comments you make with, *“I appreciate that you may not see it this way, but this is how I see it.”* Keep thinking about how you may best love your audience by carefully crafting the language you use to lovingly communicate the good news to them.
- c. **being transparent in all our public dealings.** Issues such as Child Protection, Public Safety, Finances, Property and Taxation all need to be clear to anyone who inquires.
- d. **developing a sensitive, non-aggressive response to controversial issues** (e.g. Homosexuality, Gay marriage, Evolution, Pre-marital sex). Given the way our culture quickly attacks opposing views, it is wise not to get caught up in public debates. Share your views *privately*, and always with the caveat, *“I could be wrong about this, but this is what I think the Bible says about it.”* (Here’s a case in point: From the earliest days of missionary

work in Africa, polygamists were barred from becoming members. But this public stance against polygamy caused huge tensions between the church and the general African society. Only years later did most missionaries see that this was foolishly insensitive. It was agreed that it was far better to work *privately* with those Christians affected by it rather than make public, blanket statements against it.)

I think these are some of the ways that we, as Christians, can be as “*shrewd as snakes*”...by detecting danger and avoiding conflicts whenever possible.

How can we be *harmless as doves*? Like doves, we must be above reproach, giving no cause for provocation or offense. This obviously means that:

a. We must put a priority on continually deepening our relationship with Jesus, allowing His holiness and purity to transform our lives. Visible transformation is essential!

Just this past week, we got news from our daughter-in-law that the Episcopalian minister of the church where our grand-daughter goes to pre-school was recently caught by police having gay sex in a nearby public park! He immediately stepped down from the ministry...but the damage has been done! Like so many, our daughter-in-law will have one more reason to dismiss the Gospel message. How important it is that God’s people are like doves, radiating Christ’s purity and peace to the world.

b. We must let Jesus and His Gospel change our culture (one heart at a time), **rather than trying to use political force or majority pressure.** Ever since the days of Constantine, when Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, Christians have made the mistake of using their political power to accomplish the work of the Kingdom. To be harmless as doves requires that we let go of these human means of power and, instead, become servants (rather than masters) of our culture. We must be secure in the knowledge that God will change cultures one heart at a time!

c. Develop a loving, egalitarian community! The most effective (and least confrontational) way of promoting the Gospel is through the

development of a community of love, where everyone is accepted and everyone's gifts are utilized. When local people begin to say, "*See how they love one another!*", we know we are striking a deep chord in human hearts.

d. Focus on the marginalised and the powerless. You may have heard that Australia is now considered the richest country *per capita* in the world, having over a million millionaires! So many people are self-satisfied! It's no wonder why the Gospel is getting less and less of a hearing. Like Jesus and His Apostles, perhaps we should shake the dust off our feet and, instead, focus our outreach efforts on the marginalised and the powerless—including migrant communities, refugees, the homeless and the working poor...people who are ready to hear our message of God's love!

e. Be ready and willing to give your life for what you believe in (martyrdom!) Throughout the history of the church, believers were always willing to die for their faith. In fact, all but two of the original 12 Apostles were martyred! (John: Died of old age in exile on Patmos, and Judas died of suicide.)

- Andrew: Martyrdom by crucifixion (bound, not nailed, to a cross).
- Bartholomew: Martyrdom by being either beheaded, or flayed alive and crucified, head downward.
- James the Greater: Martyrdom by being beheaded or stabbed with a sword.
- James the Lesser: Martyrdom by being thrown from a pinnacle of the Temple at Jerusalem, then stoned and beaten with clubs.
- Thaddeus: Martyrdom by being beaten to death with a club.
- Matthew: Martyrdom by being burned, stoned, or beheaded.
- Peter: Martyrdom by crucifixion at Rome with his head downwards.
- Philip: Martyrdom.
- Simon: Martyrdom by crucifixion or being sawn in half.
- Thomas: Martyrdom by being stabbed with a spear.

They did as Jesus said—They went out "***like sheep in the midst of wolves!***"
They refused to retaliate; they refused to fight back; they lived by Jesus'

words—***“Do not resist as evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”***

But surprisingly, this attitude of peaceful (dove-like) non-resistance actually caused the church to grow! This caused one of the Early Church Fathers, Tertullian, to proclaim: *“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”*.

This has continued to be true throughout the church’s 2000 year history:

- In the Madagascar of the 1850s, thousands of Christians were “speared, smothered, starved or burned to death, poisoned, hurled from cliffs or boiled alive in rice pits.” **Today**, 90 percent of the people of Madagascar are Christians.
- In the British colony of Uganda, Anglicanism was established in 1877, and African clergy were being ordained by the 1890s. From its earliest days, Ugandan Christianity has produced its share of martyrs. **Today**, perhaps 75 percent of Ugandans are Christian.
- In terms of the number of victims, the bloodiest persecutions occurred in Indo-China during the mid- and late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the church grew. In 1953, when all Protestant missionaries were forcibly expelled, many thought the church would die. **Today**, the church in the Indo-China region is experiencing phenomenal growth!
- Korean Christianity was likewise born in blood, as that nation’s Buddhist/Confucian regime killed some eight thousand Catholics. Thousands of Catholics perished during the nineteenth century, the savagery reaching its greatest ferocity during the 1860s and 1870s. **Today**, Christianity is Korea’s largest religion.

Similar persecution continues today, and yet growth continues! In a recent article in Christianity Today, the general secretary of ECWA (a 5-million-member denomination in Nigeria), Samuel Kunhiyop, was interviewed about the situation in Nigeria.

Is Nigeria as bad as we read in news headlines?

It’s even worse. Hundreds of churches have been destroyed, over 50 in Kano alone. One church and ministry has been built seven times and destroyed seven

times. Another has been built three times and destroyed three times. Pastors have been murdered in their houses. Another was murdered in the church during a prayer service.

Are Christians being targeted, or are these attacks simply reprisals against the government?

Boko Haram is an extremist Islamic organization. In 1992, the Islamic community expressed its desire, along with the Organization of Islamic Conference , to make all of Nigeria a Muslim state. Over 90 percent of buildings destroyed by Boko Haram are Christian churches. Boko Haram wants to eliminate the churches because they are unacceptable to Muslims. They don't want Christians in the Muslim areas, so they bomb those places of worship, or refuse to give them a license to worship.

How are you giving Christian leaders encouragement and hope?

The church in the north is strong and vibrant. Churches are full. We plant churches every week. The church has not declined in any way. In fact, it is growing stronger. But it is difficult for us in Nigeria when Christians are forced out of a place that legally is their own.

When I was growing up, the belief was that if you are slapped on one cheek, you turn the other cheek, a passive response. But now the young people are saying, "These guys come and kill us in our churches, destroy our churches and buildings. We're just supposed to watch them? We're not going to take this sitting down. We're going to fight back. They destroy our church; we destroy a mosque. They kill our people; we want to go and kill them."

We have to work on the Christian response, especially when the government that is supposed to defend us cannot. Gandhi said "an eye for an eye will leave the whole world blind". If the Muslims kill us and we kill them, then we kill ourselves. There's no place where revenge has ever solved any problem. We have to respond to this issue, but revenge doesn't take us anywhere. We have to love them. But with young people, it's not that easy."

Let me draw all this to a final conclusion:

Wherever Christians live, there will always be some level of persecution. Here in Australia, people will insist that you keep your faith to yourself. In other places, like Nigeria or Iraq, this idea may be reinforced with a gun or a bomb.

Nevertheless, the Christian response must always be the same! As Jesus said, ***“I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. Therefore, be shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves.”***

Let's pray.