

Wise as Serpents, and Innocent as Doves (Matt. 10:16–25)

By Jacob D. Gerber

In Matthew 10:1–15, Jesus appointed the apostles whom he would send into the world to preach the gospel of his kingdom. Now, Jesus must begin to prepare his disciples for suffering they will endure for the sake of Jesus' name. This is not a pleasant section to read; however, Jesus' warnings about the suffering that we will endure have a purpose. By suffering for his sake, Jesus makes us like him. That is, *Jesus conforms us to his image in our suffering*.

Confident Before Kings (Matt. 10:16–20)

If the previous section sounded inspiring and aspirational, the tenor of the conversation changes quickly when Jesus informs his disciples of the difficulties they will face: “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (v. 16). Note that Jesus transitions into this next sentence with the interjectory, “Behold!” (v. 16a). Lenski observes that this word “indicates the surprising nature of what Jesus tells the Twelve. Who would think of sending sheep among wolves? How long would they last? But this is what *I* am doing, Jesus says. Therefore, go and dismiss all fear and keep *me* in mind!”¹ Indeed, by the word “sheep,” Jesus “does not refer to the sweetness and mildness of their manners, or to the gentleness of their mind, but only means that they will have no greater strength or fitness for repelling the violence of enemies than sheep have against the rage of wolves.”²

Because of this, Jesus warns his disciples to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (v. 16b). As most commentators note, the link between serpent and wisdom goes all the way back to Genesis 3:1, where the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve is described as “crafty,” a wisdom word. This does not mean, however, that Jesus intends for his disciples to be as deceptive as the serpent, since the same word for “crafty” often appears in the book of Proverbs to speak of the “prudent” wisdom that God commends to his people (Prov. 12:16, 23; 13:16; 14:8, 15, 18; 22:3; 27:12).³ No, the disciples are to be as “innocent as doves.” Some have taken this exhortation as an encouragement for the disciples to “to do the right thing at the right time and place and in the right manner, [with] a serious attempt always to discover the best means to achieve the highest goal.”⁴ It is better, however, to understand that Jesus is warning his disciples specifically to “take care of their life, so as not to rush heedlessly

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 398.

² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:449.

³ Jacob D. Gerber, “Wisdom for the Tongue (1): An Old Testament Theology of the Tongue,” *The Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth* 30.6 (2022): 238.

⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 461.

into danger, or lay themselves open to any kind of injury.”⁵

The next two verses confirm this interpretation, as Jesus continues to address the safety of his disciples: “Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles” (vv. 17–18). Now, while Jesus is indeed concerned for the safety of his disciples, we should not think that he intends to remove his disciples from harm altogether. On the contrary, Jesus certainly understands that his disciples will be flogged by the Jewish courts in the synagogues,⁶ and forced to bear witness for Jesus before the Gentiles. Thus, Jesus clearly teaches his disciples that they will be hated and unable to escape harm altogether. Nonetheless, Jesus wants his disciples to be wary enough to avoid unnecessary suffering wherever possible.

Furthermore, Jesus encourages them that should “not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour” (v. 19). In this, Jesus assures them that *God* will give them (==“will be given”) what they need to say.⁷ This promise should not be misused to suggest that preachers and teachers do not need to prepare for their ministry, since this refers to those who are arrested and called upon to bear witness before persecutors.⁸ In these cases, it will be the Spirit of God who provides the words (v. 20). Here, Jesus echoes his encouragement from the Sermon on the Mount in relation to anxieties over what we should eat or drink: “do not be anxious” (Matt. 6:25–34).⁹

Continuing to the End (Matt. 10:21–23)

Even so, Jesus does not sugarcoat the difficulties that his disciples will face: “Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake” (vv. 21–22b). Nevertheless, he joins a promise to his warning: “But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (v. 22b). Calvin has a wonderful line on this last promise: “If those who fight under earthly commanders, and are uncertain as to the issue of the battle, are carried forward even to death by steadiness of purpose, shall those

⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:451.

⁶ “*Courts* is more literally ‘sanhedrins,’ a word that is used for all sorts of councils. Mostly in the New Testament it refers to the great council in Jerusalem, but here it signifies local councils (only here and in Mark 13:9 do we have the word in the plural); a council of twenty-three men was found in each locality. With it is linked synagogues, which, as we have seen before, means centers of Jewish life. Synagogues were places of worship, but they were also places of instruction and, as we see here, places where local justice was administered. The court would sit in the synagogue and punishment would be inflicted.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 253.)

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 402.

⁸ “This does not mean they should not prepare their defense, as if it will be a spur-of-the-moment revelation. Rather, it means that “every time” they need to defend themselves or the gospel, God will guide them. For OT parallels, see Exod 4:12 (Moses); Ps 119:41–46 (when taunted, even by kings); Isa 50:4 (the Servant); Jer 1:9 (Jeremiah).” (Osborne, *Matthew*, 388–89.)

⁹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 175.

who are certain of victory hesitate to abide by the cause of Christ to the very last?”¹⁰

Up to this point, everything Jesus has said has been fairly straightforward. In v. 23, however, Jesus says something that has been notoriously difficult to understand. Some consider this one of the most difficult verses in the entire New Testament: “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (v. 23). Now, before we try to understand the last part of the verse, we should first observe the principle Jesus gives toward the beginning: “flee to the next [town].” Lenski rightly observes here that, “Despite all their courage the messengers of Christ are to use prudence. They are not to throw away their lives.”¹¹ Self-preservation is only part of the reason for this admonition, as Hendriksen observes: “Would not his talents be wasted? Would it be fair to other communities that are crying for help? Let him move out! That the apostles adhered to this principle is clear from many passages (Acts 12:17; 13:46, 51; 14:6, 20; 16:40; 17:10, 14).”¹² Jesus therefore commands his disciples to flee from persecution when necessary.

What, then, does Jesus mean when he speaks about the coming of the Son of Man? Some use this verse to discredit Jesus, as though Jesus’ apostles and even Jesus himself believed that the eschatological return of Christ would happen very quickly. While this is certainly not what Jesus meant, no one view holds a consensus among Bible-believing scholars. In my judgment, two interpretations are the strongest. The first is the idea that Jesus simply means that the evangelization of the Jews will be unending throughout the ages between Christ’s first coming and Christ’s return, so that Christians will still be “going through” (i.e., “completing”) this work before the end of time.¹³ The second is the view that the kingdom of God will come in stages rather than all at once, where one stage is when the Son of Man comes to judge unbelieving Israel by the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.¹⁴ France’s commentary shows how Jesus’ words connect with this idea:

It is widely agreed that the wording of these passages is based on Dan 7:13, “one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven.”...In Dan 7:13–14 this “son of man” *comes* before God to be enthroned as king. There is nothing in the imagery of Daniel to suggest a coming *to earth*, as Christian interpretation has traditionally found in these passages; he *comes* in the clouds of heaven *to God*. The verb used both in Daniel and in the NT allusions is the very ordinary verb “come,” which is not related to the more technical NT term for Jesus’ eschatological return, *parousia*....This means that, despite centuries of later Christian

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:456.

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 405.

¹² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 466.

¹³ e.g., Blomberg, *Matthew*, 176.

¹⁴ “But the kingdom, as we have seen, comes in stages....In one sense, Jesus was born a king (see comments at 2:2); in another, he has all authority as a result of his passion and resurrection (28:18); and in yet another, his kingdom awaits the end....Against this background the coming of the Son of Man in v.23 marks the stage in the coming of the kingdom in which the judgment repeatedly foretold falls on the Jews....They will not have finished evangelizing the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes in judgment on Israel.” (Carson, “Matthew,” 293.)

interpretive tradition, when the gospel speak of “the Son of Man coming” the presumption must be that they are speaking not of an eschatological *parousia* but of a heavenly enthronement, the vindication and empowering of the Son of Man after his earthly rejection and suffering, when God will turn the tables on those who thought they had him in their power.¹⁵

Thus, “this mission to the Jews, reflecting their place in salvation-history, thus has a time limitation, the end of which (but not the end of Jewish evangelism) will be marked by the coming of the Son of Man in judgment upon Israel.”¹⁶

Conformed to Christ’s Image (Matt. 10:24–25)

Finally, Jesus demonstrates that the suffering of his disciples will follow from the suffering that he himself will endure. It is not that the disciples will be doing something from which Jesus has exempted himself. On the contrary, Jesus will first enter into suffering, and his disciples will be *like* him in their sufferings. As Calvin writes, “If we happen to be assailed by the same kind of reproach, we ought not to think it strange, that what began in the head should be completed in the members.”¹⁷ So, Jesus says, “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household” (vv. 24–25).

In particular, note how Jesus observes how his disciples will be accused of demonic activity: as “Beelzebul.” As Hagner explains, “The name [Beelzebul] means ‘lord [= בעל, *be’el*, or *ba’al*] of the house [בֵּית, *zēbūl*, “height, abode, dwelling”]’ and thus itself stands as a play on words opposite Jesus as the ‘lord of the household.’...The imagery of the housemaster and household members refers here to the one who heads and those who belong to the kingdom.”¹⁸ In this section, the encouragement Jesus wants his disciples to take is that, so far from being associated with Beelzeboul by their ministry, these accusations in fact associate them with their Lord.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Jesus mean when he says that we will be sent out “as sheep in the midst of wolves” (v. 16a)? What does Jesus mean by saying that we must “be wise as serpents” (v. 16b)? What does Jesus mean when he says that we must be “innocent as doves”? (v. 16c)? From which areas of our lives might we encounter persecution (vv. 17–18)? What is the hope that Jesus provides for his people in this section (v. 19–20)? Why is that good news?
2. Why is the opposition that we face from within our own families so much more daunting than

¹⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 396.

¹⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 1 – 13*, 280.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:460.

¹⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1 – 13*, 282.

what we endure from the world at large (v. 21)? What is the hope that Jesus provides us after telling us that “all” will hate us on his account (v. 22)? What does Jesus mean when he says that his disciples will not have completed going through the town of Israel before the Son of Man comes (v. 23)? Why is that good news?

3. What does Jesus tell us about the relationship between the disciple and teacher, and the servant and master (vv. 24–25)? If we know that Jesus suffered greatly, what does this tell us about the suffering that we will face? Why do we shrink from suffering? How does Jesus’ example prepare us to face suffering? How does our suffering conform us to Christ’s own image? Why is that good news?

4. Where do you face persecution and suffering because of your faith in Christ? What specifically makes that suffering particularly difficult for you? What from this passage encourages you in your suffering for the short-term? What encourages you for eternity? Why do you think suffering is inescapable in the Christian life? How might we live if we never suffered? What practical implications does this teaching about suffering have for your life right now?