

Be Wise as Serpents

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Finish the verse. "... And harmless as doves" (Matt. 10:16). Perhaps this is a perplexing verse to many. The serpent, with his reputation of subtlety and deviousness (Gen. 3:1), may seem to be the least likely of candidates for our emulation. And yet Christ said, "Be ye therefore wise as serpents." The key to understanding this verse is the end of the sentence: "and harmless as doves." In other words, Christians are to embody the sharp wit of the serpent, but are not to use the sharp wit for evil, but for good, thus being harmless as doves.

This is a prime example of words having various connotations. The serpent typically has a bad connotation in Scripture (i.e. Gen. 3; 49:17; Exo. 4:3; Psa. 58:4; 2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 12:9; etc.), but occasionally, such as here in Matthew 10:6, the Bible actually has something good to say about a serpent. Another passage that views a serpent in a positive light would be Numbers 21:8-9, when Moses made a fiery serpent of brass which offered physical (not spiritual) salvation to anyone who looked upon it.

In Matthew 10:6, Jesus is not condoning the serpent's subtlety. He is not encouraging Christians to be devious. He is, however, pointing out that the serpent's slyness could have been used for good if the serpent so chose. Christians would need to be of sharp wit. There would be times when Christians would be put in difficult situations because of their faith, and they needed to understand how to conduct themselves in such situations.

Again, this had nothing to do with being sneaky in the sense of using falsehoods or conniving their way out of trouble, but using wisdom to do so. Sometimes Christians need to use good ole' fashioned common sense when dealing with enemies of the faith. Is so-and-so simply ignorant of God's Word and needs further teaching? If so, then the Christian should spend further time with him. An example of such a scenario is found in Acts 18:26: "whom (that is, Apollos) when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly."

Is so-and-so simply refusing to heed God's Word? Is he trying to cause division? The Bible teaches us how to deal with men such as these as well: "A man that is an heretick (divisive man, NKJV) after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself" (Titus 3:10-11). "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them" (Rom. 16:17).

It takes spiritual wisdom to be able to determine which kind of man we are dealing with. Thus, I must be wise as a serpent, but harmless as a dove. No matter my course of action (explaining the way of God more perfectly, OR rejecting a heretic), I must handle the situation delicately, such as to not hinder the cause of Christ. I must speak the Truth with LOVE (Eph. 4:15) so as to reflect the love of Christ. "The Lord knoweth them that are his" (2 Tim. 2:19). Sometimes those who WERE His need to be admonished as a brother (2 The. 3:15). Christians need to pray for wisdom to handle all such delicate situations with the right attitude, and the right intentions (winning them back to Christ).

With love, Chase