

## Sheep Among Wolves, Part 1

Scripture: Matthew 10:16–23

Code: 2279

### INTRODUCTION

In Matthew 10:16-23 Jesus says, "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye, therefore, wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men; for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues, and ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, be not anxious how or what ye shall speak; for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaketh in you. And the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child; and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake, but he that endureth to the end shall be saved. But when they persecute you in this city, flee into another; for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come."

Before Christ would send out the disciples following His resurrection and ascension, they needed to anticipate the response they would face from a hostile, Christ-rejecting world. So our Lord sent them out for a brief training mission. But before He sent them, He gave them specific instructions.

#### A. The Sweep of Our Lord's Instructions

There is a telescoping effect of the instructions our Lord gave to the twelve. First, it had specific reference to them. Matthew 10:6 says, "Go, rather, to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." That is related to the specific time in which the disciples lived. However, Matthew 10:23 concludes with the coming of the Son of Man—an eschatological term used by Matthew to refer to the return of Christ. Thus Christ's instructions reach beyond the apostles into the church age and the Great Tribulation, which precedes Christ's return. That reflects the history of God's people from the time of Jesus' first coming to the time of His second coming.

#### B. The Specifics of Our Lord's Instructions

Matthew 10:1-15 give us insight into the apostles. Verses 1-5 tell us who they were. Verses 5-15 give us Christ's specific instructions to them. And verses 16-23 describe how the world would react to them, and how they were to react to the world.

Contained in those verses are some specifics that related only to the apostles.

1. Verse 8—"Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons." There is no indication in Scripture that they actually did raise the dead on this first, brief mission. But they would do so in their mission after the resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

2. Verse 17—"They will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues." That also did not happen on their first mission. They weren't persecuted until after the resurrection of Christ.

#### C. Confusion Regarding Our Lord's Instructions

Many people misunderstand Matthew 10:5-23. They don't understand why the disciples didn't do all the things Jesus instructed them to do, or they don't understand how and where those instructions apply. But that is a common biblical pattern.

On many occasions in the Old Testament a prophet will make an immediate prophecy that also has fulfillment in the future. For example, David often spoke of some event coming to pass or something

about himself personally, yet ultimately have in mind the Messiah (e.g., Ps. 22). Micah 5:2 says that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. Verses 3-4 tell us He will reign as King of the earth. But Micah said nothing about the thousands of years between His birth and His kingdom.

It is common in prophetic literature for predictions to have both an immediate and future fulfillment. In Matthew 10:5-23 our Lord is predicting the role of the apostles, but also had in mind the role of all Christians through history up to the time of the Great Tribulation. That's why the disciples apparently didn't raise the dead and weren't thrown into the synagogues and beaten during their first mission. Lesson

## **I. JESUS' OPENING STATEMENT (v. 16a)**

"Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves."

### **A. The Picture**

#### **1. The vulnerability of sheep**

I am not an expert on sheep, and less of an expert on wolves. But when I was in high school I had the occasion to be in the desert for a few days herding a flock of sheep. In that brief experience I was exposed to the helplessness, dependency, and timidity of sheep. In fact, sheep are so easily panicked that even a jackrabbit jumping out from behind some brush is enough to cause a whole flock to stampede. They are extremely edgy animals. And it's a good thing because when danger comes, they are utterly helpless. The only thing they can do is run, but they aren't built for speed. Philip Keller wrote A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 as the result of insights gained from his experience as a shepherd. He said that sheep need to be protected from poisonous weeds, weather, parasites, all kinds of diseases, and especially insects. In fact, there are certain flies that lay their eggs on the mucous membranes of the sheep's nose. As the hatched larvae work their way up the nose, the sheep have been known to beat their heads against rocks or trees, sometimes until they are dead. The advanced stages of infection from those flies often causes blindness. Sometimes the sheep panic and stampede in an attempt to elude the flies. But when they become so agitated they often become exhausted, lose weight, and some even die ([Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1970] pp. 115-16).

#### **2. The viciousness of wolves**

The most severe enemy of sheep is the predator--the flesh-eating wild animal (indicated in Matthew 10:16 as a wolf). According to Keller, "Two [wild] dogs have been known to kill as many as 292 sheep in a single night of unbridled slaughter. Ewes, heavy in lamb, when chased by dogs or other predators will slip their unborn lambs and lose them in abortions. A shepherd's loss from such forays can be appalling. One morning at dawn I found nine of my choicest ewes, all soon to lamb, lying dead in the field" (p. 37).

"On several occasions [cougars] came in among my sheep at night working terrible havoc in the flock. Some ewes were killed outright, their blood drained and livers eaten. Others were torn open and badly clawed.... Some had huge patches of wool torn from their fleeces. In their frightened stampede some had stumbled and broken bones or rushed over rough ground injuring legs and bodies.

"Yet despite the damage, despite the dead sheep, despite the injuries and fear instilled in the flock, I never once actually saw a cougar on my range. So cunning and so skillful were their raids they defy description" (pp. 108-9). And wolves are just as deadly.

Shepherding is a difficult profession. At the time of our Lord, the shepherd didn't own the sheep; he worked for the owner. If a shepherd reported the killing of a sheep, he had to show a piece of flesh from that sheep to prove that a wild animal had killed it, even if it meant pulling the evidence out of the wolf's mouth. The shepherd might lose his own life if he didn't show proof. The sheep owners feared their sheep would be stolen unless they required evidence of a killing.

### **B. The Perspective**

## 1. An honest appraisal

The conflict between sheep and wolves was familiar to the disciples. That they were to be sent among vicious, deadly wolves was our Lord's way of graphically illustrating the dangers of confronting a Christ-rejecting, God-hating world with the message of the kingdom.

Sometimes the wolves are among us.

a) Acts 20:29--Paul said to the elders of the Ephesian church, "I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock." b) Romans 8:36--Paul here cited Psalm 44:22: "We are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Some people view Christians as sheep to be slaughtered. Sometimes the wolves are on the outside, but sometimes they are on the inside masquerading as shepherds (Matt. 7:15). In Matthew 9:38 Jesus refers to the multitude as sheep without a shepherd. However, they are like wolves when confronted with the gospel. But the Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep--He will defend us (John 10:14-15).

## 2. An honest approach

Jesus' honesty is refreshing. I don't believe He'd be at home in contemporary Christianity--there's not enough honesty in it.

a) What we don't say We are so concerned about saving people that we may be tempted to water down the gospel. Many professing Christians don't talk about repentance or confession of sin. They don't talk about the importance of humbling oneself or hungering and thirsting for righteousness. They don't talk about obedience to the lordship of Christ. They don't talk about the narrow way that leads to salvation or the ultimate cost of following Christ. And when someone becomes a believer they don't talk about going out into the world as sheep among wolves. Few of us are as honest as Jesus was. The popular appeal today promises ease, comfort, riches, advancement, and ambition. But Jesus offers hardship and perhaps even death. b) What we should say We must tell the truth. If we are dishonest in our presentation of the gospel and of what service to Christ is, people will come to Him on false pretenses. What have we gained? That will only put more people on the broad road to destruction who are deluded into thinking they are on the road to salvation (Matt. 7:13-14). We cannot water down the reality of the gospel. (1) Hardship is a reality When Jesus called people into His service, He warned them of the hardships to come. Giuseppe Garibaldi, the nineteenth-century Italian patriot, said, "Men, I'm getting out of Rome. Anyone who wants to carry on the war against the outsiders, come with me. I can't offer you either honor or wages; I offer you hunger, thirst, forced marches, battles and death. Anyone who loves his country, follow me" (Guerzoni, Garibaldi [1882], I. p. 331). Prime Minister Winston Churchill, addressing the British House of Commons May 13, 1940 following the battle of Dunkirk, said, "I would say to the House, as I said to those who have joined this Government, 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.'" Similarly our Lord offers blood, sweat, tears, hunger, thirst, and death. (2) Persecution is a reality Life is tough on the mission field, but it's also tough to be a missionary at home. If you're not suffering much persecution, it could be the result of not being definitive about your faith. Second Timothy 3:12 says, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." But God also may be gracious in giving you a time of respite. But somewhere in the world the church is suffering persecution. One day we may experience it to a great degree here. A woman once told me of her job, in which she counseled people with social problems. The only solution she found to their problems was Jesus Christ. But her employers instructed her not to speak of Christ to anyone. She wanted to know what I thought she should do. I told her she had to decide whether to obey God or men (Acts 5:28-32). She wanted to obey God, even if it meant losing her job. If we are definitive with our faith, there will be a price to pay. You cannot confront a God-hating world without a reaction. But so much of our Christianity is locked up inside church walls. I often wonder if the world even knows who we are.

## II. SOME BASIC QUESTIONS (vv. 16b-23)

## **A. Who Are the Wolves? (vv. 17a, 22a)**

### **1. The specific agent (v. 17a)**

"Beware of men."

a) Against the saints Men are the wolves. It's true that we wrestle "against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12). Satan, the prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:2), the ruler of the darkness of this world, is behind the demonic system. But its agents are human. Throughout the years men have imprisoned, crucified, burned, and stoned the saints of God. Men are the enemy--men who talk about the milk of human kindness yet who are the dupes of Satan. Matthew 5:10-11 says, "Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.... Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake." It is men who do those wicked things. b) Against the Lord While the disciples had avoided persecution up to this point, the Lord had not. (1) The accusation of the Pharisees Matthew 9 shows an escalation of hostilities. In verse 2 He forgave the sin of a paralyzed man. In response the religious leaders "said within themselves, This man blasphemeth" (v. 3). Then they approached the disciples and said, "Why eateth your Master with tax collectors and sinners?" (v. 11). Their hatred for Jesus took a dramatic turn for the worse when they exclaimed, "He casteth out demons through the prince of the demons" (v. 34). (2) The attack of Judas There was a wolf among the twelve disciples named Judas. He ultimately betrayed Jesus, starting off the chain of events that led to His murder. We need to beware of men. Yet we must not forget to reach out to them and love them as God does. We are to "do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). We need to keep a balance. The enemy will attack through human agents. Don't be shocked when you are criticized. Don't be surprised when you are fired for articulating your faith. Don't be surprised when you're not invited to certain activities. Human agents represent the kingdom of darkness.

### **2. The universal agents (v. 22a)**

"Ye shall be hated of all men."

Persecution isn't isolated. "All men" doesn't refer to every human being who ever lived. Scripture allows for a certain amount of literary licence, as when David said, "Every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears" (Ps. 6:6, NASB). According to Mark 11:32, all men believed John the Baptist to be a prophet. That's obviously a general statement. So Matthew 10:22 appears to be saying that all classes, races, nationalities, and cultures of mankind throughout history will react negatively to the gospel.

## **The Gospel According to Romans**

God is sovereign--He knows how much we can bear. He shortens the length of trials for certain people in certain places. But I believe the main reason we don't experience more overt persecution is that we have altered our message to accommodate rather than to confront men.

The gospel begins with this fact: men are lost. Romans 1:18 says, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness." Imagine what might happen if you began to present the gospel like this: "The wrath of God is revealed against you for your ungodliness. You know what is true of God by the creation around you. But you have turned the truth into a lie and worshiped the creature more than the Creator. God has given you up to your own lusts." That is so different from the way we normally present the gospel. When you preach repentance you are actually confronting people with their sinfulness. Since they are the dupes and agents of Satan, you can count on them to react.

## **Only the Toughest Recruits Need Apply**

When people are recruited for the ministry, they need to be reminded that they are going out as sheep among wolves. The apostle Paul understood that. In 1 Corinthians 4:9-13 he says, "I think that God hath set forth us, the apostles, last, as it were appointed to death; for we are made a

spectacle.... We are fools for Christ's sake... and are naked, and are buffeted.... We are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things."

1. "Made a spectacle"

When a Roman general won a battle over another nation or city, he was given the privilege of parading his army through the streets to demonstrate his triumph. At the end of the parade followed a group of captives being led to certain death. That is the implication of "spectacle." First Corinthians 4:9 in Moffat's A New Translation reads, "God means us apostles to come in at the very end, like doomed gladiators in the arena!"

2. "Appointed to death"

Jesus told Peter he would die (John 21:18-19). With few exceptions, it is believed most of the apostles were martyred.

3. "We are fools"

The world in general considered the apostles fools and their message foolishness (1 Cor. 1:23).

4. "Buffeted"

The Greek word translated "buffeted" means "to strike someone with your fist." It was used to refer to the ill treatment of slaves.

5. "Offscouring"

That is what would be scoured off a dirty dish.

Being an apostle was no easy ministry. Serving Christ never is.

## **B. Why Are They So Vicious? (vv. 18a, 22a)**

"Ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake.... Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake."

"For my name's sake" refers to all that Christ is. Believers ultimately are persecuted because of who Christ is and what He has done.

1. Galatians 6:17--Paul said, "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Visible on Paul's body were the marks and scars from the stonings, whippings, and beatings he endured. To him they represented the marks of Christ. He knew they weren't intended for him. People weren't angry with Paul; they were upset at Christ. Since they couldn't strike Christ, they got to His emissary.

2. Colossians 1:24--Paul said, "[I] fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh." Paul took blows meant for Christ.

3. Philippians 3:10--Paul prayed, "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings."

4. 1 Peter 4:14--Peter said, "If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the Spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you." When you stand with Christ, Satan will cause people to ostracize, criticize, condemn, and falsely accuse you. But it's truly a joy to take the blows meant for Him who took the blows meant for us.

As Paul was on the road to Damascus, breathing out threats and persecuting Christians, the Lord struck him down and blinded him (Acts 9:3). Verses 4-5 say, "He fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art Thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest." Now Paul had never met Jesus, and Jesus was in heaven, so how could he have been persecuting Jesus? Christ was living His life through His people, and when Paul persecuted His people, he persecuted Him. Paul never forgot that (Acts 22:7-8; 26:14-15).

The reason the wolves are so vicious is that they hate Christ. Jesus said, "He that is not with me is against me" (Matt. 12:30).

## **CONCLUSION**

How do we react to a hostile world? I believe it will become more hostile when we are faithful to

declare the truth with the same honesty of our Lord and His disciples. Jesus gathered the twelve and told them He was sending them out as sheep among wolves. Later He told them that He would never leave or forsake them. They would win in the end (Matt. 28:20; John 14:18-19).

### **How the Sheep Fight Back**

The sheep will defeat the wolves--not in their own strength, but on the basis of Christ's power. The disciples wanted to stay close to Jesus because they knew He was their resource. He was the source of their food--He fed them on the side of the hill (John 6:1-14). He was the source of their tax money--on at least one occasion He provided it from the mouth of a fish (Matt. 17:27). He was the source of their need for love--He poured His love on them and cared for them. He turned nature into one huge parable so that every time they saw a field, a tree, a mountain, an animal, a leaf, a flower, or a piece of grain, they instantly thought of spiritual truth. He was everything to them. But when He told them He was going to go away and leave them to the wolves, they surely must have panicked. But He also told them He would send His Spirit to dwell in them. He would become their strength and power to overcome the world (John 14:1-26; 1 John 5:4-5). Through the Spirit in his life, the believer continually communes with the living Christ.

### **Focusing on the Facts**

1. In what way do the instructions Jesus gave the disciples in Matthew 10:16-23 have impact beyond that first missionary venture?
2. What were some of the specific instructions that related only to the apostles? When did some of those things actually occur?
3. Why do many people misunderstand Matthew 10? What pattern was established in the Old Testament that Christ followed in His instructions in Matthew 10?
4. What are some of the dangers sheep face? What is the severest danger? Why?
5. Explain the difficulty of the shepherd's task, especially in biblical times.
6. What don't many professing Christians often talk about in their presentation of the gospel? What should they be talking about? Why do we need to be totally honest in our presentation?
7. Who is behind the world system? Who are the agents and wolves of that system?
8. What persecution did the Lord endure during His earthly life?
9. What might Jesus have meant when He said, "Ye shall be hated of all men" (Matt. 10:22)?
10. What was the apostle Paul's perspective on being a true servant of Jesus Christ? What does each recruit need to be aware of? Explain (1 Cor. 4:9-13).
11. Why are the wolves so vicious (Matt. 10:18, 22)?
12. Why should Christians be joyful in the midst of persecution (1 Pet. 4:14)?
13. How are the sheep to fight back?

### **Pondering the Principles**

1. Are you guilty of watering down the gospel? Look up the following verses: Matthew 5:6; 7:13-14; 2 Corinthians 7:9-10; James 4:8-10; 1 John 1:8-10; 2:3-6. What aspect of salvation does each of those verses refer to? Are those aspects part of your gospel presentation? If some are not, you need to begin to present all the truth of the gospel. What happens when people respond to only a partial presentation of the gospel? Ask God to guide you in determining all you need to present.
2. Read 1 Corinthians 4:9-13. If that was your call and your future as a servant of Christ, would you follow Him? As a Christian, it could be your call, especially if your faith is definitive in the world. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to reveal the condition of your heart in this area. Ask Him to show you anything preventing you from making a complete commitment to serve Him. If you have any fear regarding what you might face, read Romans 8:31-39. Meditate on those verses, and make

them your daily prayer.

3. What is your attitude toward suffering and persecution? If it came, would you be ready and willing to suffer for Christ's sake? Read 1 Peter 4:1-2, 12-14 and Philippians 3:10. What are the advantages and benefits of suffering for Christ? To help you maintain the proper perspective, memorize Philippians 3:10.

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