

## MATTHEW 10:16

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*Reformation, October 31st 2020*

*Smith*

<sup>16</sup> **“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.  
Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”**

In 1510, the monk Martin Luther was the junior member of an envoy to Rome. He was 27, he had been a priest for three years and was now lecturing as a professor at Wittenberg. When he got to Rome, he acted like a little boy in a toy store, running around from shrine to shrine, praying to saints as he visited the relics of their martyrdom. But the longer he stayed in the city, the more he was sickened by the widespread irreverence of the population, especially the other priests and monks—not the visitors like himself, but those who lived in Rome and served there.

Luther’s concern over problems in the church grew from that point. Lecturing on Romans and Psalms a few years later when he read in the Scriptures that we are saved by the grace of God alone.

Luther’s preaching and teaching began to change at once. He was moving steadily away from what we can only call the **Cult of the Saints** to the biblical doctrine of **Salvation by Faith in Christ Alone**. A crisis came just a few months later. In the spring of 1517, John Tetzel arrived in Germany, selling the forgiveness of sins on slips of paper called “indulgences.” For a price, he claimed, you could be forgiven any sin. And for a little more money, you could even buy forgiveness for your dead parents or ancestors.

For Luther, this was a pastoral crisis: His people were being tricked into looking to something else, other than Christ, for their forgiveness. By the end of October the problem had grown to such proportions that he wanted to talk about it in public.

In those days, the faculty of Luther’s college in Wittenberg used to debate topics in front of the students to teach public speaking. Luther asked for the next debate to be on the nature of indulgences and true repentance, and he proposed 95 points for the debate on the local bulletin board, the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg. These were the 95 THESES.

As far as we know, the little college debate never took place. But the theses were quickly copied and published and became the first runaway best-seller in the history of printing and publishing. Luther became world famous. And even though the church he grew up in called him a heretic, he stands in the history of the church like Noah, Abraham, and Moses. The Lord God chose to work through the faith of this one man to restore and preserve the Gospel of Christ crucified for our sins, the message for all mankind.

I pray that you and I could have the wisdom and courage to stand up for the gospel as well. In our text, Jesus is sending out his apostles for the first time, and he says, **I am sending out like sheep already among wolves**. It isn’t as if there would be safer places to be. We already live here, among the wolves who surround us. The wolves were everyone who might oppose the gospel. Some of the Jews would refuse to believe that Christ the Messiah was this man, Jesus.

Some of the Gentiles would refuse to believe that there is only one true God. And as we know, when people are against something, sometimes they get violent about it.

But the most important thing to remember for the apostles was the beginning of this commissioning: “**I am sending you.**” They weren’t alone, Jesus’ words were the message. Jesus’ authority was their authority. They had the hand of God on their shoulder, and so do we.

Jesus doesn’t promise us a happy, prosperous, easy life. What he promises is that our sins are forgiven through his blood shed on the cross, and as we respond to his forgiveness, he promises to be with us and to help us. When we speak, we don’t have to be worried about what to say. The gospel does the talking. And yet, we should pay attention to who we’re talking to.

Jesus says we should be **as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves**. Now, David says in Psalm 18, “To the pure you show yourself pure, to the crooked you show yourself shrewd” (Ps. 18:26). But David was praised God for the way he shows himself to friend and enemy. Jesus, on the other hand, is not talking to God, but to us.

“**Shrewd as snakes**” picks up the Greek translation of the description Moses gives in the story of the fall: “The serpent was more cunning or crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made.” In the early chapters of Genesis, the “wild animals” means the four-footed predators in particular, the lions and tigers and bears—and wolves, too. Of all of them, the serpent was the smartest, the cleverest, the most cunning.

I found that out once as a missionary when I was mowing my lawn and a four-foot long stick in my yard turned out to be a snake. What lion can pretend to be a bush? What tiger can play at being a stone? What wolf can disguise itself as the wind? But a snake can be shrewd even without being wicked or evil. It can wait, or move very slowly, not only to attack its prey, but to escape attack, or defend its nest.

We think of being shrewd in this passage mostly to avoid enemies. But we can also be shrewd and cunning in the way we plan missions, plant new churches, or with the way we prepare ourselves to carry the gospel to our friends, relatives and neighbors. We can learn to use our strengths rather than worry about our weaknesses. We can use the gifts God has given us in the very best ways we know how.

But Jesus also says “**Be innocent as doves.**” At the same time we are shrewd, we need to be innocent, without blame. We don’t use sinful or forceful means to carry the gospel. We need to be careful that we avoid the temptation to force people to seem more Christian. That’s not what gets us into heaven. I had one grandparent who tried to shove evolution down my throat every Sunday afternoon, I was grateful for parents who insisted that I go to Church and Sunday School every Sunday morning, and even encouraged me to teach Sunday School when I got older.

There’s a difference between insisting that your children go to church or Sunday School or our Christian elementary school—that’s just good Christian parenting—and trying to make our neighbors act like Christians. Sharing the gospel helps our neighbors. And being a good neighbor, even when it means suffering because of their noise or their foul language, may leave

the door open to the gospel. On the other hand, you might suffer so much that in the end you may have to move for the sake of your own health. That's just good stewardship.

We show ourselves to be **innocent as doves** when we live as Christ would have us live, and when we make the spiritual needs of other people a priority in our lives.

And that's one of the places where this passage exposes my sins. Sin in its basic form is being the enemy of God. We might not think of it as hating God, or as opposing God, but when we want to ignore or go around what God says, we show that deep down we don't want to tolerate anyone over us. And if you're like me, just a big dumb clumsy sinner at heart who doesn't always think things through so very deeply, we betray our foolishness like the child who wonders whether the fire is really hot. Or whether the boiling water is so very different from bath water. We like to stick our finger into the flame or into the bubbling pot about twenty times a day, just to see if anything's changed.

As innocent, baptized children of God, our consciences make us pull the burned finger away, turning from temptation, and begging God's forgiveness. And what is God's response? Does he slap our tempted fingers? Does he say "I told you so!" Does he storm out the door in disgust? No. If our fingers have led us to sin, he takes them and kisses the burned flesh and makes it better with his love. If our eyes have led us to sin, he purifies them with the vision of himself in his holy Word, the Savior on the cross, crucified to save us from any punishment we deserve. I

If our sinful egos have led us to set our own desires above God's will, he takes the ego that says "Me me me!" and he soothes our sinful baby-bird cries for more and he speaks the truth in love: "Not 'me,' but 'I.'" "I am the way," Jesus says, "the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." And he leads us, guides us, beckons to us, invites us, welcomes us with unyielding love. He says: "You are mine. I forgive you, and I will always be with you." And we thank him in the paths of our lives.

We navigate the path we take every single day, embracing the **daily recovery** we have in Christ's forgiveness, the **unity** of the fellowship of the church, and seeking ways to **serve** God and give him glory.

But our Lord has placed us where we live and when we are living for a purpose. Part of that purpose is that we might come to faith and be saved, but the other part of that purpose is that we might share that salvation.

The Reformation helped preserve the pure gospel of forgiveness in Christ. Every Christian denomination must come to terms with the Lutheran Reformation. Some reject it, turn away from the Bible, and look for some other way to heaven. Others think they can do better, but they end up rejecting the Word of God, too.

Praise God for restoring the truth to us through the faithful ministry of Dr. Martin Luther, whose ministry blessed the whole Christian Church on earth. But you and I have work to do as well. Carry the gospel to your friends and family and the people you love. In some cases you will be sheep among wolves, but be shrewd and clever as snakes, even as you are, thought Jesus, innocent as doves. And the peace of God, etc.