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“Wise and Innocent”

Sermon Series: “Complements,” No. 2

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Matthew 10:5-16

5 Jesus sent out the twelve apostles with these instructions: “Don’t go to the Gentiles or the Samaritans, 6 but only to the people of Israel—God’s lost sheep. 7 Go and announce to them that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. 8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cure those with leprosy, and cast out demons. Give as freely as you have received!

9 “Don’t take any money in your money belts—no gold, silver, or even copper coins. 10 Don’t carry a traveler’s bag with a change of clothes and sandals or even a walking stick. Don’t hesitate to accept hospitality, because those who work deserve to be fed.

11 “Whenever you enter a city or village, search for a worthy person and stay in his home until you leave town. 12 When you enter the home, give it your blessing. 13 If it turns out to be a worthy home, let your blessing stand; if it is not, take back the blessing. 14 If any household or town refuses to welcome you or listen to your message, shake its dust from your feet as you leave. 15 I tell you the truth, the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah will be better off than such a town on the judgment day.

16 “Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. So be as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves.

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We’re in Matthew chapter 10 this morning...if you’d care to turn back there with me.

Matthew 10, verse 16 is the only place in the Bible where four different animals are mentioned in one sentence. Like Cheryl told the kids, we get sheep, wolves, snakes and doves...a whole zoo there inside of 13 words.

And the animals themselves paint the picture of what Jesus is saying, don’t they?

Jesus is such an excellent communicator that what worked 2,000 years ago still communicates to us, and provides a one-sentence prescription for navigating the troubles this broken world inflicts on Jesus’ people.

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Please notice that what Jesus says here really flies in the face of the thinking of the health and wealth gospel. Those misguided brothers and sisters of ours...who guarantee prosperity or healing or a life of ease for every follower of Jesus ...they have trouble with this passage, because

Jesus, here, is blatantly warning us that following Him will ***not always***, and maybe ***not ever***, in this life, be ***easy***.

Yes, we have power and authority over even the principalities of darkness and evil, but that's not to say that the fight they put up will not cause suffering in the lives of even the most faithful Christ-follower.

So please don't think there's necessarily something ***wrong*** with ***you*** or your ***faith*** if you're experiencing suffering of some sort while following Jesus.

Jesus actually sums up the whole idea of this passage there in verse 24, essentially saying:

***“As teacher, so student. As master, so servant.”***

If we want to know how the unsaved world will treat the ***follower*** of Jesus, all we have to do is look at how the unsaved world treated ***Jesus***.

Yikes, right?

But that's exactly why the ***healthy*** human perspective has to reach farther than just today and tomorrow and the next 50 years...because ***eternally speaking***, just as whatever happened to Jesus here on earth was worth it for ***Him***, it will also be worth it for ***all*** who ***follow*** Him.

Our future is eternity with God the Father. That is the only reality worth living for, and the only way to that reality is through following Jesus.

So it's entirely reasonable to expect the unsaved world to treat us like it treated Jesus. If that's not the reality of our lives, then we're either experiencing extraordinary mercy...or...we may not be as much like Jesus as we think we are...as we need to be.

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The ***end*** of the Christian life is eternity with God.

The Christian life on ***earth***, though, involves some semblance of suffering...Jesus says...the sort of suffering a sheep would experience at the hand...or at the paw, I guess...of a wolf.

That's the picture He paints with the first set of animals, and we all know what happens when a wolf gets hold of a sheep in our world.

It's only when Jesus ***returns to rule***, Isaiah tells us, that the ***“wolf will be at peace with the lamb.”***¹

That's how this world works.

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So...how do we respond? How do Christians live in that sort of world?

Jesus covers ***that*** in the ***second*** set of animals...the serpent and the dove.

Normally, of course, those two animals would ***not*** be seen as naturally going ***together***...any more than wolves and sheep.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 11:6

All snakes are carnivores, so any snake would happily eat a dove with no apology at all...if they could catch one. To a snake, burping up a few feathers would be a small price to pay for Kentucky fried dove.

And yet, Jesus puts their characteristics...the characteristics we all think of when we think of snakes and doves...Jesus puts them together in the life of a believer.

Jesus declares them complementary to one another. [ *Places peanut butter and jelly on pulpit to illustrate* ]

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The snake, Jesus says, is *phronemoi*. [*FRO nee moy*]

Depending on your English version, that translates as wise or cunning or prudent or shrewd.

We get that image of the snake from the Bible, because Genesis 3:1 called the capital “S” Serpent, this.

Back there, it carried a negative connotation, of course, because **that** Serpent was moving toward evil ends.

But the word itself...the concept of shrewdness is **not** inherently **negative**. It **can** be, but it doesn’t **have** to be.

Being shrewd means being **smart**, being **wise**, figuring out how to accomplish your **purpose**...knowing how to get **done** what you need to do **efficiently** and **creatively** and **cleverly**.

Being shrewd means knowing how things work, so you can move your purpose forward effectively...in spite of opposition.

Shrewdness is knowing how to deal with that difficult kid in your class or on your bus or on the playground without hurt or harm or offense.

Shrewdness is getting a good deal in a business transaction...

It’s knowing how to care for a crop in an unpredictable climate...

Shrewdness is ending the sermon before the congregation mentally checks out.

So shrewdness can be good, and Jesus describes how that good shrewdness operates with the last animal He mentions – the dove.

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The dove, in the Bible, is the symbol of purity. The dove represents harmlessness, integrity and honesty. It’s having motives that are right and true and loving and good.

The dove represents a clean heart, which is what makes shrewdness good. We’re innocent when both our purpose and our manner of achieving it is like that of Jesus.

Working toward the goals that accomplish His purpose and His interests...not just our own; and doing so in a way that reflects Jesus’ love and compassion.

That’s the serpent and the dove.

That’s shrewdness and innocence together.

It's almost always easier to be **one** or the **other** instead of **both**, but that's not the way of Jesus. He put them together so they complement each other...so they bring out the best in each other. Because without innocence, you see, shrewdness quickly becomes selfish and manipulative. Shrewdness takes all the best for ourselves. Shrewdness makes people fierce and callous and merciless – cutthroat.

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At the same time, without shrewdness, innocence can quickly devolve into naivety. People become gullible and weak...martyrs at the mercy of others...giving up and giving in instead of pressing on.

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Jesus is telling us here that, to accomplish His mission on earth, we need this finely balanced character...we need the serpent and the dove...we need shrewdness and innocence...guiding us...just like shrewdness and innocence guided Jesus.

So we can get where we're to go, but without harm.

So we can accomplish His call, for everyone's good.

His followers are not to be just aimlessly floating through life.

Neither are we to be so task-oriented that we mow down everyone around us.

We're out for a purpose...a purpose that does the good of Jesus.

Serpent and dove.

Shrewdness and innocence.

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That's Jesus' life, isn't it? Jesus met His opponents with the perfect balance of wisdom and tact and timing.

Shrewdness and innocence, complementing each other.

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We see the same in the Apostle Paul's life. Like when he used his wits...arguing for his rights as a Roman citizen.<sup>2</sup> He didn't let them take him out there and then...he had more to do and he used truth to move ahead.

The serpent and the dove, working together.

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The believers in Damascus who helped Paul escape by lowering him over the city wall in a basket...they are great examples of this.³

² Acts 22:25

³ Acts 9:25

Paul writing to persuade Philemon to have mercy on Onesimus.
Paul talking to the Athenians about their altar to the unknown god.⁴
Peter standing up for Jesus and for Paul at the council in Acts 15.

The serpent and the dove.
Shrewdness and innocence...together.

That's the model of thinking and living that Jesus presents to all who follow Him. That's the kind of life that fulfills Jesus' purposes, even in tough situations.

So, here's the question for us today: are we open to those coming together in our lives?

Shrewdness and innocence. That combination might seem unusual to us. The truth is, our natural personalities tend toward one or the other, but Jesus wants to bring them together in all His followers.

God's Spirit can give supernatural wisdom and creativity and boldness to the one who would just naturally sit in a corner somewhere flying the white flag of surrender.

You're not harming anyone, but you're not accomplishing much for the Lord, either, you see? Jesus can lift you out of gullibility and resignation and give you the boldness and courage and even the divine knowledge to engage your world with purpose and success.

That's the serpent invading...and changing...the dove.

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On the other hand, the Spirit of Christ can pour love into even the coldest, most calculating heart, so your shrewdness...your acumen becomes channeled toward Jesus' own good purposes...such that even your manner...the way you think about others and the way you value others and the way you operate in others' lives...is changed.

You become as interested in others' best as you are in checking something off your list.

That's the dove invading...and changing...the serpent.

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Jesus can do that work even today, as we come around His table. He wants to meet us in our need...whatever that might be...and make us **complete**, so we can accomplish His purposes in His ways.

So as we come to the table, you may want to ask Him, "Jesus, where do I need more serpent in me? Where do I need to be bolder and wiser and more cunning and courageous?"

But then also ask, "Jesus, where do I need more dove in me? Where am I abrasive and caustic and even maybe dishonest or uncaring? Is there a place in my deepest parts that you need to clean?"

And then listen for Him...listen for His Spirit pointing out that place, and know that, if you'll then open yourself to Him there, He'll do just what's needed.

⁴ Acts 17:23

He'll bring the serpent and dove together...for the glory of His purpose. So His will can be done though us.

The world has always been challenging to followers of Jesus, but Jesus knew that, and He offers us all the equipment we need to live victoriously for Him here.

Would you let Him equip you completely, and complementarily, today?

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**Communion:**

**Closing Song:** "He Is Able, More Than Able"

**Closing Word and Benediction:**

The Lord's full intention is to bring all His people to completion...to provide us all we need to live *fully* and *victoriously* the life He calls us to live.

So He offers us the graces of *shrewdness* – extraordinary wisdom and creativity...and also *innocence*...purity of heart, integrity and honesty.

They work together, complementing each other, so we can live as Christ and do His will in a hostile world.

So, let's receive all of Jesus' grace for us:

His gift of *salvation*...the forgiveness of sins first and foremost; and then...

His gift of *equipment*, so we can be the shrewd and innocent followers He calls us to be. For the working of His will...for the glory of His Father...and our Father.

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Thanks for coming to worship today. The Lord bless and keep you. Amen

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