

A World of Wolves

Matthew 10:16-25

One of the difficult questions that Christians often have to answer has to do with the relationship that we have with the world. Errors abound, with some Christians seeking to withdraw from the world as if the communal life of a Roman catholic monastery is the ultimate goal. Separation and isolation are seen as the appropriate expression of holiness. And although we wouldn't advocate joining a monastic order, many evangelical Christians seemingly imitate that practice by entering their own little world of isolation, with little or no interaction with anyone other than their own little circle of Christian friends. A Christian sub-culture, a bubble, a cocoon. Essentially, a withdrawal from anything related to the culture of the world in which we live. That's one extreme.

On the opposite extreme, other Christians enter the world freely and openly, without any discernment about what is appropriate or inappropriate, with no attempt to identify and distinguish what is worldly from what is godly, thus denying the whole concept of what it means to be holy.

So with those two extremes in mind, what is,

I. OUR APPROACH TO THE WORLD.

What should it be? Jesus' words in our text this afternoon are so very insightful, so very helpful in that regard. Simple and to the point.

v.16

The starting point of this approach to the world is to acknowledge and recognize this distinction between sheep and wolves. As a Christian, you must realize that we live in a world of

wolves! And wolves are dangerous. They threaten your very life. They threaten your safety and your well-being. Indeed, they are deadly. They are predators seeking to devour their prey, and Christians are that prey, sheep.

Beloved, the world is not neutral. It is not safe. It is not comfortable nor friendly. And you can't enter the world without that realization, or you will do so at your own peril. You can't befriend the world, as if the world will befriend you and treat you well.

James puts the warning this way,

James 4:4 "Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."

So a Christian who becomes a friend with the world is like a man who becomes an intimate friend with a woman who is not his wife. He has an affair. He commits adultery. The language couldn't be any stronger. A friend of the world becomes and adulterer, an enemy of God. John's warning is similar.

1 John 2:15 "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. 17 And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever."

That has to be your starting point when you approach the world. We live in a world of wolves, wolves who are committed to seeking your death and your destruction. And those wolves have a leader, a ruler, whom Paul calls "the prince of the power of the air." Peter calls him the Devil,

1 Peter 5:8 “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.”

So the awareness of the presence of dangerous wolves is the beginning of wisdom, and Jesus calls us to be,

A. Wise.
v.16

Interesting analogy, isn't it, to use the serpent in a positive illustration. Wise as serpents.

Gen. 3:1 “Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made.”

The serpent’s craftiness was, of course, evil. He called into question what God had said,

Gen. 3:1b. “And he said to the woman, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden’?”

But here, to be wise means that you are wise as a serpent, understanding the situation as that ancient serpent understood his. Our wisdom with relationship to the world means that you understand the dangers. Like the wisdom you teach little children when it comes to busy streets. Stay out of the street. That's wisdom, isn't it?

A wise man knows his enemy. That’s what Jesus means, to be wise as serpents. A wise man recognizes the threats that imperil his life. He sees the dangers ahead of time, and he stays away.

So think about the dangers in your life, identify them. What does it mean for you to be wise as you approach the world in

which you live? Certainly, that would include knowing your own heart and your own vulnerabilities. It would include knowing when and how you are tempted, when and how you are attracted to the world.

So think about it. In what ways do you lack wisdom? In what ways do you need wisdom in order to recognize and resist all the dangers that the world has to offer you? What wisdom do you need to identify the ways in which the world does attract you, the ways in which you have become friends with the world, or the ways in which you have come to love the world?

That could have reference to personal relationships, relationships with unbelievers that are too close, too intimate, that instead of your witness upon the unbelievers, their worldliness has the greater impact on you?

It could be in the entertainment of the world, whether in the form of movies or music, the attraction with the world offers is very appealing to some people. And for some, it is a great danger. That could mean dress, clothing and appearance. It could mean the threat of the dangers of social media and the loss of personal communication, the dangers of internet pornography, the dangers of secularism or materialism, the greed or pride of life. The danger could be in the pursuit of money or success or fame or the pleasures of entertainment. The influence of the world is everywhere, and in this day of instant, constant communication through the internet, those dangers have never been more pronounced.

So be wise as serpents. Be crafty and clever enough to know your own heart even as you recognize the wiles of the devil in his insidious and consistent efforts to draw your heart away from the love and faithful worship of God. Know your own heart, and

guard your heart.

Prov. 4:23 “Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life.”

Be wise as serpents. And innocent as doves.

B. Innocent.

Sad, isn't it, that Christians often really do become worldly. They imitate the world. They are not innocent at all. So we are urged,

James 1:26 “If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”

Unspotted. You are holy to the Lord, a holy priest. You are to be separate from the world. Unspotted, unstained by the world. For example, as we read in,

2 Cor. 6:14 “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? 15 And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? 16 And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people.” 17 Therefore “Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you.” 18 “I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty.””

And,

1 Cor. 6:18 “Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man

does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. 19 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? 20 For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body.”

1 Peter 1:13 “Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; 14 as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; 15 but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”...22 Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, 23 having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever.”

Innocent. Pure. Unspotted. Beloved, this call to innocence is not legalism. It is not a decline into works-righteousness. Rather, it is a call to love God, to serve God, to honor God. So your approach to the world must be to maintain and preserve your innocence.

This is such a consistent exhortation in Scripture. As Paul writes to the Romans,

Rom. 16:19 “For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil.”

Similarly, immediately after his statement about working out your own salvation with fear trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure, Paul writes this,

Phil. 2:14 “Do all things without complaining and disputing, 15 that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16 holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.”

People of God, that is your calling before God, to be blameless and innocent, without blemish. Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. With that approach, with that commitment, Jesus continues to speak in a way that defines what ought to be,

II. OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD.

It is a world of wolves, and, consequently,

A. The wickedness of the world is evident.

It is plain to see. It is not hard to understand. Nor should it be particularly surprising or, for that matter, unsettling. What else would expect from wolves! What else would you expect from the prince of the power of the air who is at work in the world?

v.17-18

One of the great dangers of the Christian life is the desire to be liked, the desire to be popular. The desire to be found acceptable even in the eyes of the world. It is the danger of avoiding conflict, avoiding trouble or even persecution. Or the danger of being terribly shaken or unsettled when those things do come.

Trouble in the world should come as no surprise at all. It is inevitable. Inescapable. And it becomes so painfully and personally evident.

v.21

There is obvious reason for this wickedness in the world. The world hates you! Because it hated Jesus.

v.22

This is really hard for some people, because they cannot endure the struggle of being hated. They cannot endure the mistreatment that comes from being hated. And so Jesus gives us this encouragement, “But he who endures to the end will be saved.” It is a call to perseverance, a call to faithfulness, even when the worst of the world's hatred is heaped up upon you.

That situation, of course, requires your faithful witness.

B. The wickedness of the world requires our faithful witness.

And Jesus gives us his encouragement here. He promises us his grace. His strength. His wisdom. Even his words to speak, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

v.19-20

That's not an excuse for me as a preacher to forsake my study and sermon preparation, all in the name of relying upon God and the power of the Holy Spirit. This is not a reason for anyone to abandon a faithful and consistent study of the Holy Scriptures, or to despise theological study or preparation. But it is an encouragement that God will equip you for witness when he calls you to be faithful in that situation.

So pray that you will be able to give an answer for the hope that is in you, as Peter puts it. And trust God to equip you for that task. With another, final encouragement. Namely, that your suffering at the hands of the world is nothing less than,

III. OUR FELLOWSHIP WITH JESUS IN THE WORLD.

When you suffer persecution, you enjoy fellowship with Jesus.

When you suffer in the world, you suffer with Jesus.

v.24-25

Paul even boasts about that privilege,

Phil. 3:7 “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

And Peter,

1 Peter 4:12 “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; 13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 14 If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified.”

So in this world of wolves, it is good to have in your mind very clearly,

A. An awareness of the sufferings of Jesus.

They are not the sufferings of a martyr, but rather the sufferings of the son of God who gave his own life as an atoning sacrifice for your sins. They are the sufferings that earned and accomplished your redemption.

And yet, in that context, we join in Christ's sufferings ourselves, not to contribute any portion to our redemption, but to identify fully and completely with Jesus. With sufferings, we are united to Christ. We fill up what is lacking in his sufferings.

So if you belong to Jesus, if you are a member of the household of Jesus, then when the master of the house is attacked, you will be attacked with him. When the head of the church endures the suffering and persecution of this world, then the whole body is united to him in that same experience. That's the world in which we live.

And this is our hope, that Jesus will return in judgment and triumph at the end of the age. And so our fellowship with Jesus is found in,

B. An awareness of the impending return of Jesus.

And we live in the light of that expectation. That's why we have that encouragement of,

v.22

The end will come, and those who belong to Jesus will persevere. At one point, Jesus even says, the days will be cut short for the sake of the elect.

And you have this hope as well,

v.23

The sufferings will end. The persecution will end. The humiliation of those who are united to Jesus shall end. For Jesus shall return, and you won't have to flee to all the towns of Israel. There is a light at the end of that tunnel.

So what is your hope? Where is your confidence as you

approach this world of wolves? That the end will come, and the kingdom of Jesus will triumph. And as for the church, the body of Jesus here on earth, the gates of hell shall not prevail against us.

All of that is what it means when we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes," to use the words of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper which is before us this afternoon. We eat and drink, we feed on Christ, we eat his body and drink his blood, and we will continue to do so until he returns. And he will be our strength.

So go into the world, for Jesus sends us into the world. Jesus sends his disciples into a world that hates them. Just listen to what Jesus prays for us as his disciples.

John 17:14 "I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 15 I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 17 Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. 18 As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth."

So people of God, go into the world! That is where Jesus would send you. Live in the world, but do not be of the world. Be holy, be separate as you live in this world. Live in this world of wolves, and bear witness to the world, even as you endure suffering produced by the hatred of the world, following in the steps of our Lord Jesus himself. And as you do so, be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.