

A Sensitive Witness  
February 9, 2014

We're going to start with a little quiz this morning. I will give you a characteristic and you name a creature that might be described by that characteristic. Just shout it out.

as blind as... a bat  
as proud as... a peacock  
as brave as... a lion  
as strong as... an ox  
as stubborn as... a mule  
as busy as... a bee  
as angry as... a hornet  
as sly as... a fox  
as wise as... an owl

I couldn't get a good answer about why people in ancient times thought owls were wise. Some of these phrases have been around for a long time. In fact, Jesus uses two of them in the Bible passage we'll read this morning. In this passage Jesus is sending out the twelve apostles on a preaching trip to some of the towns and villages of Israel. Among His other instructions He gives them instructions, which also apply to us as we take the good news of Jesus to the world.

**Matthew 10:16 (NIV)** I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

Those apostles are all dead and gone now. It falls to the church to take the good news of Jesus to the world. We have missionaries who take the good news for us to other parts of the world. We have the task of sharing the good news here in our communities. In doing so, we face a world that is just as challenging as those who were sent first. We too are like sheep among wolves.

One wolf is stronger than many sheep, and can kill a whole flock. Sheep do not have big teeth or claws or strength to stand up to a wolf. Sheep can only try to run away from a wolf. So they don't have much going for them.

As we go out into the world with the good news of Jesus, we are like sheep among wolves. So what advice does our Savior have for us as we go out like sheep among wolves? What wisdom does He give us? He gives us two animal characterizations. He tells us to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

Why is a snake called shrewd? Our various English translations of the Bible use the following kinds of words in this passage about snakes. They use **shrewd, cunning, wise, smart, wary, and clever**. How did snakes get such a reputation? It started in the garden of Eden. In the book of Genesis it says this.

**Genesis 3:1 (NIV)** Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made.

Looking again at various English translations for this passage we have **cunning, crafty, sneaky, clever, subtle, and shrewd**. So what is it about snakes that led people to characterize them with such words? Other than this ancient description, why did people associate these ideas with snakes? How is a snake shrewd?

Well snakes don't move quickly. They do strike quickly when they bite, and some can move quickly when threatened. But most of the time, snakes lie very still or move very slowly. They watch. They observe. They see what is taking place in front of them. When they move, they move very cautiously and deliberately. Other animals like the squirrels and chipmunks in your yard are jumpy and constantly moving. Snakes appear to be very cautious in their movements.

It is as if they are thinking carefully before they move or act. Is this a winnable situation for me? Should I lie still and see if an opportunity presents itself? Or should I move on to somewhere else? Is there danger to me here? Should I move away from here, maybe find a place to hide? How can I use this situation to my advantage? That's what snakes appear to be doing. And so we have given them the character of shrewd or cunning from this behavior we have observed about them.

That is what Jesus wants us to copy from the snake. As we try to share Jesus with others, we need to size up every opportunity. Since we are like sheep among wolves, we will have to use wisdom and caution in the world. We will have to be shrewd as we approach unbelievers to engage them in conversation about religion and spiritual things. We will have to do this so that we can effectively communicate the good news of Jesus to those who want to hear about Him. **To communicate the good news of Jesus, we must gauge people's interest in hearing it.**

Gauging situations is a part of everyday living. You already do this some, in other ways. At least I hope you do.

There was an article in the newspaper recently about knowing how to react if you find yourself in a situation like the recent shooting at Columbia Mall. It said the best choice of response was to find a place to be hidden from view and safe. It described one woman who went into a dressing room in a department store, locked the door, and then put her feet up so they could not be seen under the door. And she sat there very quietly. The advice in the article was to find something to hide under or behind, preferably something that would stop a stray bullet. This is much better than running out of the store into the mall to look for an exit door.

The article went on to say that if you are walking through the mall, or on the street, and a fight breaks out, leave the scene in a hurry. Don't stop to take a picture with your phone. One of the people involved might think this is a good time to pull out a gun. And even if you are not the target, bullets often go into people who were not the target.

If you never think about such things happening to you, you won't be ready when, and if they do happen to you. And they can happen to anyone, anywhere. Be cautious and deliberate in your daily living. Know what to do in each situation. Look around as you park your car. Look around as you go back to your car. What is the man over there

doing? Is he watching you? Is he coming this way? You have to size up the situation to protect yourself.

When it comes to being a witness for Jesus, we must be cautious and deliberate. In every conversation we find ourselves in, we must size it up as a possible witness opportunity. Not every conversation is a good opportunity.

The other day my truck wouldn't start. AAA came out and jumped it and I drove to my mechanic to have it checked out. A woman was there in the waiting room, and seemed eager to talk, so we talked while her car was being finished. She had fallen on the ice. I expressed my hope that she was not seriously hurt. She had not broken a leg or ankle, but had fallen on her side and her back was hurting a lot. She kept getting up and walking a bit, not wanting to stiffen up, though sitting felt better.

We talked of weather and vehicles and our mechanics. I found out she was married and had several school age kids, and that they moved here in 2005. But the subject of church or religion didn't come up. The closest I got was to say I worked just down the street. She didn't ask where, so that was that.

I could have forced the subject by asking her if she went to church anywhere. But I did not feel that it fit in the conversation.

To be as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves means that we size up the situation all the time. Not every situation or conversation can be used to talk about Jesus. We don't want to be rude and force the subject on those who aren't interested. Some Christians speak of witnessing as if we must present the gospel in every conversation. There is nothing subtle or shrewd about that. I know of preachers who think it their duty to preach the gospel at every wedding and funeral, no matter what the families involved want. I've read complaints against the visitation teams of some churches because those who visited guests insisted on entering the home and insisted on presenting the gospel, even when the homeowners insisted that they were already saved. The church folk were totally insensitive to the situation and the people involved.

As we go out as sheep among wolves, let's be careful about when and how we tell people about Jesus. We will never get wolves to choose to become sheep by acting like wolves. While we must never deny our Lord, we don't have to be in people's faces about it. While we must never back away from admitting we are a Christian, we must not be smug about it or act as if we are better than those who are not Christians. Jesus says to be shrewd as snakes.

Now let us take up the other characterization Jesus mentions. He says to be as innocent as doves. Other translations give us **innocent, harmless, guileless, and without falsity**. This one has a scientific explanation, at least science as it was believed back at that time in history. The Greeks postulated that good health of a human or animal was dependent on a balance of four liquids in the body. These liquids were blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. Each of these liquids were associated with certain behavior qualities.

Yellow bile comes from the gall bladder. This bile is a very bitter tasting substance. So too much of this, it was believed, would affect your behavior in negative ways. Too

much yellow bile was blamed for a person being **easily angered, bad tempered, argumentative, or just hard to get along with.**

So why were doves considered innocent? There were two reasons that led to this. The first is that many doves have no gall bladder. There is no yellow bile, or so it was thought, to cause aggressive behavior.

Second, doves are pretty peaceful, easy-going creatures. They are innocent and non-aggressive, even when their nest is threatened.

Jesus wants us to copy this behavior of doves. Not only should we be people of good character traits like honesty, integrity, and faithfulness. We must also be people of good personality. In order to be effective witnesses we need to be easy-going, calm, even-tempered, and not-easily-angered.

So Guard your reactions to others. We can't get upset by things people say about Jesus, the church, us, or those we love. We must ignore insults. We must keep our cool. We must not be argumentative or disagreeable. This is what Jesus means by us being as innocent as doves. **As sheep among wolves we have to be careful what we say and how we say it.**

So to summarize Jesus' advice, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Or to put it another way, **Be as careful as snakes and as non-offending as doves.**

Now let's put things on the other side a moment. If someone were to approach you about your religion in hopes of sharing with you their religion, how would you want them to do it? Don't you want them to be considerate of you? Don't you want them to gauge your interest and not be pushy if you show no interest? Sure you do. Then that is how we must act towards others that we hope to share Jesus with.

If you are talking to people and it is obvious that they don't want to talk about religion, don't. If they do want to talk about religion or spiritual things, then listen a lot. Find out what they believe, and why. And then ask if you can share what you believe and why. Be considerate. Don't tell them they are foolish for choosing to believe what they believe. Don't tell them they are wrong. Simply tell them what you believe and why. Leave conviction of the truth to the Holy Spirit.

We have the most important information that anyone can hear. And everyone needs to hear it. But getting them to hear it is useless if they are not interested in it. Gauge their interest. Look at their face. Listen to their voice, their tone. And listen to the Holy Spirit.

Jesus used every chance he got to share the good news of the kingdom of God. He did not force himself on anyone. When he ran into opposition, he moved on. He went to those who were interested and left alone those who were clearly not interested.

The apostles did the same. As sheep among wolves, we would do well to do the same.

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None of us here who are Christians had to change before Jesus saved us. We were of the world. We had worldly values.

We came with the intention of changing ourselves. We came with a sorrow for our sin and a desire to please God with our lives. But we did not have to change first, before God accepted us. If you are thinking you have to change something in you or your life before you become a Christian, you are wrong. Today, right now, just as you are, you can receive Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Receive Jesus as Savior by trusting in Him. He died to pay the penalty for your sin.

Receive Jesus as Lord by giving Him your life. Then He will start, and empower, the change process in you.

Don't put it off. Do it today, right now, as we go to Him in prayer.