

Faithful Living While We Wait
Part Five. Matthew 10.16-31
The Shepherd and his Sheep out among Wolves

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David Henderson

Mark Twain famously said: "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I *do* understand."

There are some passages, like the one we looked at last week, that are difficult because we *don't* understand them.

Well, the passage we are looking at today is difficult because we *do*. The meaning is pretty plain, and the implication is pretty uncomfortable.

This morning we're wrapping up a series on how Jesus calls his followers to live in this long in-between time between his first coming and his second coming.

We've already explored four parables that Jesus used to teach about how to live during this long waiting period. This morning we look at one more passage on the same theme, but while the other four were presented as parables, this one comes to us more in the form of a proverb than a parable.

So here's the passage. Jesus begins by saying

Matthew 10.16

I am sending you out . . .

I need to pause here to give some context.

The passage comes at an odd moment in Jesus' ministry – at least odd to his disciples.

One day, part way into his brief time with them, he paused his ministry of teaching and healing, and he gathered his disciples together, and he said, "Okay, now I'm going to send you out with my message of good news that the Kingdom has come, and with my power that puts the presence of the Kingdom on display, and I'm going to let you represent me to people I've never seen in places I've never been."

So he sends out the twelve. But before he does that, he gives them a new title.

Up to this point, he has called them his *disciples* (Matthew 10.1-2).

Disciple means a learner, a student, a follower. The Twelve will always be his disciples, but he now gives them a second title. They are *apostles* (Matthew 10.6-8).

Just like the title *steward*, which we got to know over the past few weeks, the title *apostle*, though it's unfamiliar to us, was a familiar job title to the people of the ancient Near East. An apostle is a representative.

In both cases, a steward and an apostle are people who serve and answer to a person in a position of power and authority over them.

But where a steward is a manager and investor who stays at home and serves while the master goes away, an apostle is a representative and envoy who goes away and represents the master back home.

So Jesus sends out the twelve to represent him as his apostles, speaking and ministering in his name. That mission is described in Matthew 10 (10.1-42) and Luke 9 (9.1-11).

"Great, that's done," you picture the disciples saying. "Now let's get back to hanging out with Jesus."

But then, once again, this time as he nears the end of his ministry, he organizes a second mission. This time he sends out seventy-two of his followers, giving them essentially the same commission as he did the first time. We see this second mission described in Luke 10 (10.1-24).

It turns out – as became obvious to the disciples after Jesus died and rose from the dead and ascended to heaven – that these were not random isolated events. These were dress rehearsals for the mission he was about to give to every one of his followers throughout the world and throughout the ages until his return.

We find a version of that "great commission" at the end of each gospel.

The most familiar version is found at the end of Matthew's gospel, chapter 28.18-20, when Jesus the risen King, risen from the dead, commissions not just the twelve, not just the seventy-two, but the entire church:

Matthew 28.18-20

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

But we also find a much simpler and more direct version of it in John's gospel, chapter 20, when, after the resurrection, Jesus gathers with his followers and says simply, "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." (20.21) We'll come back to that in a bit.

So I told you we were looking today at a passage that was really difficult – not because it is so hard to understand but because what it means is so clear.

You might think the difficult words I had in mind are those first five words in Matthew 10.16

I am sending you out . . .

And those *are* difficult words – incredibly difficult words.

They ripple with implication. Our lives are not our own. Jesus has all authority. He is the King, and we are on this earth to fulfill his purposes. We have been sent out. Every disciple, every follower, is also an apostle, a sent one.

Is that how you understand yourself? As a sent person?
Is that how you see the people around you? As people to whom you were sent?

But now we come to the part of the passage that is *really* difficult.

Especially today, given our current cultural climate, with how riled up people are in the political realm, and how riled up they are in the evangelical world, and how quick everyone is to attack, and to attack back, I think it's possible that the words that *follow* those five words are even harder for us to really accept and take to heart.

In fact, I wonder if this may not be one of the hardest passages we've looked at in a long time.

Before we read them, I want to encourage us to stop and ask God by his Spirit to help you put our guard down and let these words penetrate deeply, really deeply, to the heart of who we are. . .

Because these words tell us that, important as our words are, who we are and how we relate is a crucial part of our message. As Florin told us a couple of weeks ago, *we are* the message.

Wherever we go, whoever we see, wherever we post on social media, whatever we say and do, *by the way that we say it and do it*, we are giving this world a basis on which to form their impression of the Jesus we love and serve.

I was in a conversation with someone recently in our community, someone in that wide circle of service people that can become invisible to us, that can become just part of the

machine that hands us our coffee or rings up our groceries or takes care of our bodies or fixes our houses or our cars.

This is someone who interacts with a lot of people every day. She said to me, "You know, you are the very first Christian I've ever met who was kind and took the time to get to know me and treated me as a person and didn't leave me feeling judged."

I share that not because of the light in which that puts me, but because of what that says about her experience of Christians. Those words were as sad to me as they were humbling.

Wherever we go, wherever Jesus sends us, we offer the world not just a message from Jesus, but a *picture of Jesus*.

Here's what Jesus says next.

Matthew 10.16

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

We saw what Jesus wants us to do. He spells it out clearly. Go and make disciples in my name.

Now he spells out *how he wants us to do it*. Go out into this world in the same way I did. Like sheep among wolves.

Wow is this difficult! Not difficult to understand. But difficult to accept, difficult to swallow – especially in a rights-based society that encourages us to put ourselves ahead of others.

So let's open this up a bit.

I am sending you out *like sheep* . . .

The word Jesus uses is just the generic term for "sheep." He doesn't name a specific breed. But the only type of sheep in Palestine in the time of Jesus was the Awassi Sheep, the same kind of sheep that is most common there today.



From what I've read about Awassi sheep, these are the things they are known for:

They are adaptable, non-anxious, easily adjusting to new environments.

They have a remarkable ability to go without for long periods of time without making a fuss. When difficulties arise, they remain quiet and docile, calm and not frantic.

And they are trusting, peaceable, docile, and friendly toward strangers.

That's what Jesus says we should be known for. But is it? Does that sound like the church in the US today?

Jesus goes on. . .

I am sending you out like sheep *among* wolves.

Our English translations are more vague than the Greek is, which conveys more clearly Jesus's design and intentions. Jesus isn't saying we'll happen to occupy the same space with them.

He says, "I am sending you out straight into the middle of wolves, right in among them."

Clear implication: I am sending you to them. I want you to go right in there among them. And I want you to stay right in there among them. But . . . I don't want you to become one of them.

I am sending you out like sheep among *wolves*.



There is only one kind of wolf in the region. Arabian Grey Wolves have not been studied closely, so there is not a lot we know about them. About all we do know, other than that they are a bit smaller than the wolves we have in North America, and they often remain alone, and they are active at night, is how they hunt.

Arabian wolves are constantly on the hunt. If they are awake, they are hunting.

They are opportunistic, targeting the young and the weak, isolating them from the herd.

They often hunt in packs, surrounding their prey and cutting off their escape.

They are relentless, using their stamina to wear their victims down, patiently tracking them over long distances to exhaust them, nipping at them along the way.

And then, at a moment of vulnerability, they use their speed to attack, their incredible jaw strength to lay hold of the victim, and their razor-sharp teeth to do the rest.

Which brings us to the obvious point of contrast Jesus is intending to make when he talks about sheep among wolves.

Wolves are predators, sheep are prey. As you probably know, a simple way to identify which animals fall into which category is to notice how their eyes are arranged. Predators like wolves have their eyes on the front of their heads, allowing them to focus them together on their victims. Prey like sheep have eyes on the sides of their heads, allowing them to be on the lookout for their enemies in every direction at the same time.

It's curious to think what that says about human beings. But Jesus anticipates that thought. To his followers he says, "I send you out as prey among predators, as sheep among wolves."

And we say – or at least, some of us say: "Okay. I get it. Alright. I'll go with that. Just give me this trim package."



This is an Awassi *ram*.

Interestingly, the ancient Greek word for a ram, *krios*, was the same word that they used for a battering ram – just as we do in English.

What do we know about how Awassi rams defend themselves?

Through combat and domination. Like battering rams. Rams use their horns to assert their dominion, sometimes bashing into their enemies head on, sometimes locking horns with them and pressing them down into submission.

The way they defend themselves is by going on the offensive.

At least from my vantage point, this seems to be one of the more popular models for sheep in the evangelical church in the US. And I'm afraid I'm not the only one who thinks so.

According to recent research done by the Barna group, while the majority of Christians see themselves as caring, friendly, encouraging, generous, and good natured, fewer than ten percent of non-Christians agree.

According to Barna, half of non-Christians in the US see negative qualities in evangelicals, and one quarter of them see evangelicals primarily or even exclusively in negative terms. Why? They associate them with power, control, and intolerance. In other words, because they act like battering rams. By taking the offensive they have become offensive.

It seems as though some evangelicals have never read Matthew 10.16. And they certainly don't seem to have read Luke 10.3. This is what Jesus says as he sends out the seventy-two on the second dress rehearsal:

Luke 10.3

Now go, and remember that I am sending you out as *lambs* among wolves.

Not rams, but lambs – young weak hornless defenseless lambs.

So when wolves circle and attack, if they're not rams, how do sheep defend themselves?

First, they keep watch for threats. Constantly. Sheep have amazing senses. Like many prey animals, they have rectangular pupils in eyes placed wide apart, allowing them to have a clear view in every direction even while they are grazing. They can rotate their ears toward any suspicious sounds. And their sense of smell allows them to smell a wolf hundreds of yards away. Between their sight, hearing, and sense of smell, they can recognize a wolf almost a mile away.

Then they do what they can to keep their distance from their enemy. But if a wolf gets too close, they flee, sprinting away while keeping an eye on the enemy behind them.

But they don't scatter as they run; they instinctively band together, finding strength in numbers. And then they keep watch, all of them pressed together, their ears up, their noses reading the wind, their eyes fixed on their enemies. Isolated sheep are the most vulnerable. A tight flock is almost impossible for a wolf to attack.

When I was in Nepal a few years ago leading a Seminary in a Suitcase, our Nepali friends introduced us to one of their country's favorite games. It's called *Bagh-Chai*, or Tigers and Goats. It's what's known as an asymmetrical game, with predators and prey pitted against each other: twenty goats try to fend off the attack of four tigers.

When Jesus sends his followers into the world, it is the ultimate asymmetrical gameboard. How could sheep possibly survive among wolves? Turns out the primary winning strategy for the prey in an asymmetrical game is to band together, which takes away all the possible ambushing moves from the predators.

Let's look at the other half of the verse. Jesus says:

Matthew 10.16

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore *be as shrewd as snakes . . .*

The word for snake Jesus uses here is a generic one. There are more than thirty snake species in Israel, and this is a word that includes all of them.

But just to give you an idea of what led people from the Near East to think of snakes as shrewd, let me introduce you to one of the more common.



This is an Arabian horned viper. They are found in deserts throughout the Middle East.

These guys are not loud and aggressive. Instead, they use their camouflage to blend in to their surroundings. Sometimes, both to stay cool and to stay safe, they burrow into the sand so all that can be seen of them is their eyes and nose.

They are even tempered and patient, slow to be triggered, even slower to strike at a potential threat, even to the point of warning an animal coming too close by rubbing its scales together and creating a hissing and crackling sound before they strike.

Jesus tells us we should display that sort of shrewdness.

When he talks about "the shrewdness of snakes," Jesus is quoting from Genesis 3 and the story of the Evil One tempting Eve.

According to early Jewish teachers in their interpretation of Genesis 3 – and I think this is so important – *the serpent revealed its shrewdness in how deeply it understood the ways of the human heart.*

In the Book of Proverbs, the word is used to describe godly men and women who show themselves to be wise and insightful.

Interestingly, this is the same word we spent some time with last Sunday when we looked at Luke 16 and the parable of the dishonest steward. Remember: the result of the shrewd steward's creative and strategic action was not only that everybody thought better of him but that they also were left with a higher view of his master as well.

Jesus calls us to display that sort of cunning, the cunning of a snake . . . but without the venom.

He finishes by saying

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and *as innocent as doves.*



This is a Tor Dove, one of the most common doves in Israel. It's known in England as a Turtle Dove when it migrates there for the summer.

Doves are utterly harmless. They are among the most vulnerable of birds. They are essentially defenseless. They feed out in the open, and they build their nests on the ground. When they fly away, they fly slow and straight up into the air, making them an easy target.

The word "innocent" that Jesus uses to describe them means pure, not mixed together with something that doesn't belong. When it's used to describe a person, it means guileless, free of any hint of evil, not characterized by scheming or manipulation or self-serving ambition or vindictiveness.

When shrewdness is joined with dishonesty it leads to ends-justify-the-means scheming and deception. But when shrewdness is joined to dove-like goodwill and a gentle heart, it will inevitably express itself in warm acceptance and gracious forgiveness and loving sacrifice.

Here is Jesus' charge to his disciples:

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

In his wonderful commentary on the book of Matthew, Dale Bruner writes:

This is the motto of mission. The missionary disciple's coat-of arms consists of four panels, with one animal in each panel – a sheep, a wolf, a snake, and a dove...

I thought that was a really thought-provoking idea so I used AI to create one for us. Take a look as I read on.



Bruner writes:

We may be disappointed to be called "sheep" (wouldn't "tigers" be better?). Sheep are not the most impressive creatures in the animal kingdom. Yet the challenge of discipleship is precisely to give up the world's standards of heroism....

Jesus does not say that we are to "become" sheep, but more fundamentally we are in fact going out "as" sheep – into the midst of wolves. This "sheepishness" is due to the nonviolent nature of Jesus' work... We are not primarily fighters, we are not allowed to be haters, and we cannot even use the arsenal of invective that revolutionary movements find necessary for motivation... Disciples are not to see themselves as engaged in conquering crusades.

Jesus' portrait of sheep amid wolves teaches disciples their vulnerability, but his portrait of snakes says, "Don't be stupidly vulnerable". Disciples are not asked to imitate everything in snakes; their stealth or poisonous attacks, for example, only their intelligence... The first wisdom of serpents is simply the prudent realization that they are amid wolves...

But lest the snake imagery encourages a Christian guile or a too prudent cleverness, Jesus paints in doves to complete his mural... Doves are in the world of birds what sheep are in the world of beasts – peaceful, harmless, and non-violent.

The animals on the seals of great states are almost invariably impressive creatures: lions, eagles, bears, and other fearful-looking beasts. The main animals on the seal of mission are quite different: sheep and doves.

Obviously there are still long and important conversations, informed by other passages of scripture, that need to happen related to things like war and injustice and abuse. But Jesus is giving us a basic posture of the heart as we walk through this world that stands in fundamental opposition to the way this world operates.

See what I mean about words that make us uncomfortable?

* * *

But let me take this one step further. Or rather, let's let Jesus take this one step further.

Eight verses later, in Matthew 10.24-25, still addressing the disciples as he is about to send them out for the first time, Jesus explicitly connects their mission with his own when he says:

The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters.

When Jesus sends out the church as sheep among wolves, he is calling them to walk in his own footsteps, in just the same way that he, the Lamb of God, came into this world, not in a show of strength and power but in weakness and vulnerability, not taking up arms in hate but laying down his life in love.

It certainly cannot be a coincidence, that when Jesus came to picking the main characters in this proverb, sheep and doves were the two most common animals that were offered up as sacrifices by the Jewish people.

Jesus is saying,

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves *just like me*. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves, *just as I was*.

Think of the many passages that call us to pattern our lives after his own.

We are called to be humble, just as he was.

Matthew 11.29

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for *I am gentle and humble in heart*.

Ephesians 4.2

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

We are called to lives of self-sacrifice, just as he did.

Matthew 16.21

Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things . . . and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Matthew 16.24

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple *must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*"

We are called to refrain from a life of force and violence, just as he did.

Luke 22.49-51

Jesus' followers said, "Lord, should we strike with our swords?" And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, "No more of this!" And he touched the man's ear and healed him.

Matthew 26.52

"Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword."

And we are called to refuse to retaliate, to refuse to respond to power with power, to answer attack with counterattack, when we are wronged, just as he refused to do.

I Peter 2.20-23

If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, for Christ suffered for you, *leaving you an example*, that you should follow in his steps. *When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats.* Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

When Jesus says

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

He is saying, "Just like me!" "In the same way the Father sent me, so I am sending you." (20.21)

What gives us the freedom to go out into this world as vulnerable sheep among ruthless wolves?

Not the confidence that everything will go the way we think it should. Or that we'll get our way. Or that we won't be hurt.

But the confidence that Jesus is the King, and he is with us, and he is coming back. We can cling to our hope and wait in patient confidence, *knowing* he will return, and when he does, he will put this world right. As the prophet promises in Isaiah 11.6:

In that day *the wolf and the lamb will live together*; the leopard will lie down with the baby goat. The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion, *and a little child will lead them all*.

How does Jesus call us to live in this in-between?

With urgency, knowing that the door is closing. As it relates to the people God has placed around us in this life, the window of opportunity to put the love of Jesus on display is closing.

And with hope, certain that the King is coming, and when he does, he will make all things new.

And as we wait for that day, we are called
to show love to those who don't show love to us,
to love our enemies and forgive those who wrong us,
free of hate, refusing to retaliate,
entrusting ourselves to God rather than relying on our own devices,
depending on the One who is our example and our life:
 Jesus, the lamb of God,
 Jesus, the Lion of Judah,
 Jesus, the coming King.

Would you respond in prayer as our worship team comes forward and leads us in our response?