

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 10:16 - 10:20 (Part 1)



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg examines Matthew 10:16-20 and how it relates to the larger context of Matthew 10. He highlights the importance of Christians being like sheep among wolves, relying on the Holy Spirit for wisdom and guidance. Gregg cautions against an isolationist approach to the world and instead stresses the need for Christians to be bold in preaching the gospel. He also notes that the message in Matthew 10:5 about not going to Gentiles or Samaritans does not apply to the broader mission of spreading the gospel to all nations.

### Transcript

Today we're turning to Matthew 10 and we're continuing in what might be called the missionary discourse of Christ. The Gospel of Matthew has the teachings of Christ largely organized in five discourses. The first is the Sermon on the Mount, which occupies chapters 5-7.

The second is this missionary discourse in Matthew 10. Then you have the parables discourse, which is in Matthew 13, which is simply a collection of parables. And then in Matthew 18, you have a fourth discourse, which is on the general subject of relationships.

And then we have the ever-popular Olivet discourse found in Matthew 24-25, where Jesus talks about things that were about to come upon the destruction of Jerusalem. These five discourses are the largest collections of the sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, at least. And they all appear, at least several of them appear, and I think they all probably are collections of the sayings of Jesus, rather than simply representing things he said on a single occasion in each case.

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew is three chapters long. What appears to be the same sermon in Luke only occupies half a chapter. And the additional material that Matthew includes, but which Luke does not include in that place, seems to come from things Jesus said on other occasions on the same subject.

Likewise, this missionary discourse, when Jesus was sending out the Twelve to go to

various cities and to preach the Gospel, and this, of course, is not the Great Commission, this is not at the end of Jesus' lifetime, but this is in the midst of his ministry in Galilee. Well, this discourse appears to be a collection of things that Jesus said on the general subject of the mission of the disciples on several occasions, but Matthew seems to have gathered them together in this one chapter. One reason for saying so is that up to this point we have covered the first 15 verses.

And these 15 verses at the beginning of chapter 10 have a parallel in Luke chapter 10, where Jesus also is seen sending out the Twelve. It apparently is the same sending. That is to say, Luke chapter 10 seems to have the same story as we find here in Matthew chapter 10.

Excuse me, it's Luke chapter 9, because in Luke chapter 10 we have him sending out the Seventy, but in the sending out of the Twelve, it's Luke chapter 9. But the point is that when he sends them out, he gives them these same instructions in Luke that are found in the first 15 verses of Matthew chapter 10, but then Matthew 10 continues on for almost another 30 verses. And these 30 verses, approximately, that occupy the tail end of Matthew chapter 10, are not found in this context in Luke, but they are found in other contexts in Luke and in the other Gospels. That is to say, the words that we're about to read in the rest of Matthew chapter 10 may well have been uttered by Jesus on other occasions in other settings, but because they are on the same subject, Matthew includes them here as part of his gathered sayings of Jesus about the subject of the missionary activities of the disciples.

So, it may be that what we're about to read in verse 16 and following was uttered on another occasion, and there's actually some evidence that this is maybe the case. Now, beginning at Matthew 10 and verse 16, Jesus said, Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues, and you will be brought before governors and kings for my sake as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak, for it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.

Now, let's stop there for the moment. Jesus says he is sending his disciples out, not into a friendly environment at all, he's sending them out like sheep in the midst of wolves. What's interesting to me about this is that just before this discourse began, in the closing verses of Matthew 9, it says in Matthew 9, 38, excuse me, 36, Jesus said, well, it says this, But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered like sheep, having no shepherd.

And then he said to his disciples, The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. And then, of

course, he sent them out themselves on this mission.

Now, before he sent them out and before he gave them this commission, it says that he noticed and he was moved by the fact that the people of Israel in general were like sheep having no shepherd. And so one might well deduce that in sending these disciples out, they were going to be more in the role of shepherds, because the people of Israel needed somebody to give them spiritual food, to preach the gospel to them. And so Jesus sent out his disciples as it were to fill this deficiency in the shortage of shepherds.

And yet he says to the disciples, as he sends them out, I'm sending you out. He doesn't say as shepherds. He says, I'm sending you out as sheep.

Now, that doesn't mean that they are not also shepherds. There are in the body of Christ, in the church, people who occupy the role of shepherds. We call them pastors, but the word pastor just means shepherd.

In the early church, each church had several of these, and they were called elders or bishops. And they were told to pastor or shepherd the flock of God. You'll find this when Paul, for example, in Acts chapter 20, in verse 28, he instructs the elders of the church of Ephesus to pastor the church or shepherd the church.

Also, Peter, in 1 Peter chapter 5, in the opening verses, tells the elders of the churches to shepherd the church of God. So it's clear that the leaders of the churches are, in a sense, shepherds. They are told to shepherd the church.

But in another sense, they are simply sheep as well. They are not the shepherd. Ultimately, only Jesus is the shepherd of his sheep, and all other shepherds are really just sheep who are assigned to oversee other sheep.

And so these disciples who were being sent out, as it were, to be preachers and leaders, were in fact themselves sheep needing a shepherd, and sheep in a vulnerable position. Now, normally a shepherd protects his sheep from wolves. That's one thing a shepherd does.

Now, these men may have been sent out because there was a shortage of shepherds, but they were not necessarily going to be exempt from the danger of wolves themselves. He said, I'm sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. He didn't say, I'm sending you out as shepherds in the midst of wolves to chase off the wolves, but rather I'm sending you out into a situation where your very lives are in danger, just like sheep surrounded by a pack of wolves, their lives would be in danger.

So what are you supposed to do about that? Carry a gun? Carry a knife? Avoid all contact with the world? Well, obviously not. They were sent out to preach to the world. They were sent out to be in the very midst of the wolves.

They were not sent out to be like sheep on a different hillside from where the wolves were living. They were like sheep in the midst of wolves. Now, what was their response to be? Well, Jesus says there at the end of verse 16, Therefore, be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

Now, he could have said harmless as sheep since he said they were like sheep among wolves, and sheep certainly are harmless, at least to the wolves they're harmless. But Jesus continually shifts metaphors. In fact, right at the beginning in the verses we read earlier where he said the people were like sheep having no shepherd, then when he spoke to the disciples he didn't say, look, there are many sheep having no shepherd.

He said, look, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. He changes the metaphor right away from sheep and shepherds to a harvest and people who harvest grain. This is very common in the teaching of Jesus, and so we find it right here.

He says, you're like sheep among wolves, therefore be harmless as, and he doesn't say sheep, he says harmless as doves. And if anything, doves are even more harmless than sheep are. Not that sheep can do much harm, normally speaking.

I mean, maybe a ram could, but sheep are, generally speaking, extremely harmless animals. But he doesn't even choose sheep, even though he's already mentioned sheep, as the illustration of how harmless the disciples should be. He chooses an animal even more feeble, even more harmless, a dove.

And he says you need to be as harmless as a dove, but you need to be as wise as serpents. Now, the way I understand this, he's saying that the disciples are going to have to live in a world that is hostile toward them, which threatens their very lives, but they're going to have to live, in one sense, by their wits. Now, a little later, it makes it clear they're not going to be living by their wits.

He says when they bring you before courts, don't even premeditate what you're going to say. The Holy Spirit will give you the things to say. But in a sense, they're going to have to live by wisdom.

It will have to be Holy Spirit wisdom. It will have to be the wisdom God gives them. But they're not to live by force.

They're not supposed to support themselves and defend themselves by force. That certainly is implied when he says be harmless as doves, and he says it in the context of facing mortal danger for your testimony. That is the context, because he says, I'm sending you out as sheep among wolves.

In other words, you are in mortal danger. Your life is in danger. You can die.

And he doesn't say, as we might expect, therefore, make sure you're well armed.

Therefore, make sure that you're in good physical condition so you can fight back. He says, rather, be harmless.

You're sheep? Be sheep. Be even more harmless than sheep. Be doves.

Now, isn't that a strange thing to our natural thinking? For Jesus to tell them, your life is in danger, therefore, be harmless. Therefore, do nothing to defend yourself. Even though he says they must be wise as serpents, he later says not to trust in their own wisdom for their defense when they are brought before the courts.

Whatever may not be clear in this teaching, at least one thing is clear. And that is that if they are to survive, they will survive not by force but by wisdom. And this wisdom will not be their own wisdom.

It will be the wisdom that God will give them as they lean on him and trust in him for wisdom. Now, it's interesting that he says be as wise as serpents. I mean, that particular simile, serpents, is a strange thing because we're usually accustomed in Scripture for serpents to be considered something bad.

And to compare the disciples to serpents, one might say be wise as owls or some other animal that might be regarded to be a wise animal rather than serpents in order to avoid the very association with the devil himself and demons who are often likened to serpents and scorpions, metaphorically in Scripture. But maybe this is well advised on his part. Maybe the reason he says be wise as serpents is because you need to be as wise as your adversaries.

And your adversaries are the people of the enemy, of the serpent. And as they use strategies against you, you need to strategize. You need to anticipate their strategies.

You need to be as wise as they are. You need to be not outwitted by them. Now, in my opinion, being wise as serpents probably has to do with lying low, probably has to do with low profile.

There's hardly an animal with as much body size as a serpent that lies as low as it does because it has no legs. It is a low-lying creature. It has a low profile.

And not only that, of course, that has nothing to do with its wisdom. In fact, snakes would not be regarded by modern scientists as particularly wise creatures. I mean, they have small brains, and they're not like dogs or some animal that you could train.

When Jesus said be wise as serpents, he was implying, I think, that serpents are wise enough instinctively to seek cover, to avoid confrontation. Certainly most serpents are this way. If they know that someone's coming, they hide.

And since they are low-lying, they can hide in holes or under rocks or lots of different

places. And I think that what Jesus is saying is that you should be as cautious of the danger of those who are against you as a serpent. Because remember, back in Genesis chapter 3, God said that the serpent and man, or actually the seed of the woman, would be at odds with each other and that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head.

And you see, that has been really the history of man and snakes since that time. Generally speaking, when people find a snake, unless they happen to be lovers of reptiles, and obviously there are some beneficial snakes, quite a few, and some farmers like to have them around, and not everyone kills snakes, but an awful lot of people, not being experts enough to know the difference between a venomous snake and an ordinary one, they'll just kill it. Just take no chances.

Just kill the thing. And therefore, snakes, everyone's got a license to kill them, as it were. It's like they have a big target on them saying, crush my head.

And because of that, because they're in danger from everyone they meet, they lie low. They basically keep in a safe place if they can. That is their wisdom.

It is instinctive with them. It's not IQ manifested. It is simply the instinctive self-preservation.

And Jesus says to his disciples, you are going to be in danger too. And there will be people who want to kill you. And therefore you need to be, in some respects, like a serpent.

Wise enough to stay out of trouble, if possible. Now, this does not mean that they're supposed to live entirely secret lives and never preach their gospel. In fact, this was uttered to them on the very occasion that they were told to preach the gospel.

But it must mean that they were to not remain in a dangerous situation unnecessarily, just out of plain stupidity. As a matter of fact, a little later on, we didn't get into these verses yet, but we will. He tells them, if they're persecuted in one city, they should flee to the next city.

He says that in verse 23 of Matthew 10. He says, when they persecute you in this city, flee to another. So, even though they are told to preach the gospel and to put themselves at risk, yet they should be wise enough to know that if persecution is what they meet instead of reception, that they should probably lie low or leave town and try it somewhere else.

So, what he is telling them is that they will be in danger, and their survival is going to depend not upon them being fierce and good fighters. Actually, they need to be harmless as doves. They need to make sure they do not sully their testimony by bringing violence or antagonism that does not represent Christ into the situation.

The Jews of the Old Testament were not harmless as doves, nor was it necessarily considered a virtue to be. In the Old Testament, they fought many wars. The people who were most heroic were people who went and, like Samson, killed a thousand people with the jawbone of an ass, or other people like that in the Old Testament.

Some of David's mighty men were esteemed because of all the enemies they killed practically barehanded. These were not exactly men who were harmless as doves. But Jesus is bringing in a kingdom that is not advanced in the same manner as the kingdom of Israel in the Old Testament was advanced.

You see, the kingdom of Israel in the Old Testament was a kingdom that was political. It was one political nation in a world full of political nations. It just happened to be different because it was the nation that God had selected to be on their side and to bless them and to use them to bless the rest of the world.

However, their survival as a nation depended on much of the same things that the survival of any nation depended upon. Political nations, because they are political nations, have governments, borders, armies, and so forth to defend those borders. They have citizenship that can be defined in terms of physical, geographical features, and so forth.

And as such, Israel, as a political nation, in many ways perpetuated its survival the same way that other political nations do, and they did not do the wrong thing. In fact, Jesus, when he was arrested in John chapter 18, and Pilate was questioning him about the nature of his mission, Jesus said, My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have fought to prevent me from being taken by the Jews.

But he says, However, my kingdom is not from here, meaning from the world. Now, that is John 18, 36. Now, what Jesus said was, If my kingdom was of this world, for example, like Israel was, Israel was a worldly kingdom, he said, If my kingdom was of this world, my servants would have fought to protect their king.

Well, that apparently is, according to Jesus, an appropriate thing for kingdoms of this world to do. And Israel was a kingdom of this world, and they did fight. But Jesus said, My kingdom is not of this world, and therefore my servants do not fight.

They didn't even fight to defend their king from being arrested. Now, of course, one of the members tried to fight, but Jesus rebuked him and told him not to do so. But the point here is that unlike the kingdom of Israel, the natural Israel, the disciples were promoting a kingdom that would be spread by other means than the sword.

It was the kingdom of which the prophets wrote, Isaiah, in Isaiah chapter 2, and Micah, in Micah chapter 4, where they spoke of a time when they would beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. That means their weapons of war would

be exchanged for peacetime weapons. The gospel of Jesus Christ is like seed planted in hearts, and the disciples' mission was more like the mission of people going out and planting seeds to promote the kingdom of God, the seeds of the gospel, rather than people going out with swords to lop off the heads of those who reject the gospel.

And therefore, the disciples' mission was that of harmlessness in one sense. They were harmless in that they were not going to kill anybody. They were not going to fight with people in a physical sense.

In another sense, though, they were very threatening to the status quo. They were very threatening to the devil. And in that sense, they were not as harmless as doves.

And, of course, when Jesus said, be harmless as doves, he meant in the physical sense. Obviously, in preaching the gospel in a lost world, Christians are doing something that does great violence to the powers of darkness. There is a spiritual conflict that is going on.

And when we preach the gospel, we are involved in that conflict. And the very preaching of the gospel is violent spiritual warfare against the powers of darkness. But that gets into another realm than that which Jesus is speaking of.

Jesus is here talking about the physical circumstances of the disciples as they go out. He says to them, they'll be brought before governors and kings for Jesus' sake. He says that in verse 18.

And he says, this will be for a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. Interesting that he mentions the Gentiles here. Because back in verse 5, he said, do not go into the way of the Gentiles, nor enter a city of the Samaritans.

And now he says, they're going to be brought before kings and before the Gentiles. Well, this is one of the indicators that we are now reading a section of the chapter that comes from a different context. And that Matthew has gathered sayings of Jesus on this subject from various points.

Because when he sent out the twelve initially, he did not send them among the Gentiles. And now he's predicting that they'll be before kings and before the Gentiles. And, of course, that prediction does apply to their later ministry.

After Jesus had died, resurrected, and ascended into heaven, they did go before kings and Gentiles. But here we find Matthew including this information. Actually, this information is found in a different context in the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24, verses 9 through 13.

And also in Luke 21, verses 12 through 19. So, this material about them going out and being a testimony before the Gentiles and so forth, really is found in another setting in



Jesus' ministry and seems to be important here. But the point is, it does apply to these men's mission later on.

And it applies to the mission of Christians today to a certain extent. We'll talk more about this mission and the things Jesus said about it in our next session together. Unfortunately, our time has run out for this time.

So, please tune in next time and we'll continue our study through Matthew 10.