
Sheep Among Wolves (Matthew 10:16-23)
11/5/2017 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



Sheep among Wolves: who do you think is going to win that? Maybe there's some Disney movie out there where the sheep win, but otherwise, the wolves are going to win every time. Why would God send his people out as sheep among wolves?

Well, two reasons: 1) God loves the wolves. God wants those wolves to turn into sheep! God wants unbelievers to become believers. God wants people to be saved!

2) God loves the sheep. He doesn't want his sheep to have false delusions about their own strength. God wants his sheep totally depending on him, trusting in him alone. Our entire relationship with God is one of faith in him, trusting what he says over everything else. If we trust in our works or our sincerity or our efforts or anything else over and above God, we are worshipping a false god and living as wolves. God wants us to remain in the faith and so he lets us live in a world where we can only be his people by trusting in him alone.

Our Gospel lesson today from Matthew 10 records Jesus' warning and instructions to his disciples just before he sent them out on their own ministries on their own; without Jesus physically right there with them. This is how Jesus paints their ministry: they would be sheep among wolves. It would be dangerous. It would be terrifying. And they would have no chance... by themselves. Jesus warns them that they would face physical persecution. They would be brought before councils and rulers. They would be arrested and tortured. Members of their own families would betray them. Jesus warns them: the world will hate Jesus' followers.

Today, not much has changed. We too are sheep among wolves. Maybe you haven't faced physical persecution for your faith, though it does still happen today. But, in some ways, we shouldn't expect it now. Just look at history! Satan tried to destroy Christ's church through physical persecution. What happened? Christianity exploded all over the world! The more Christians were tortured or put to death for their faith, the stronger was their confession and the more people flocked to Christ.

Satan has learned from that. You continue through history and you see Satan largely tone down these physical attacks on Christians, though they do still happen.

Continue through history and you see Satan reverting to his old strategy, not physical attacks, but mental and spiritual persecution. Satan has gone back to what worked in the Garden of Eden. Now Satan is attacking Christ's Church with lies.

Just look at the world we live in! How few people go to church today in America? And the people who do go to church, how many go because they have the truth of God's Word there and not because they like the music, or the people, or the preacher? Many people today only go to church to be entertained. The world all around us is leading us away from God. The ideas that you and I have grown up with from TV, books, the news, politics. Guess what, those sources aren't going to tell you the truth of God's Word. They aren't going to influence you to live like sheep, like believers. They are going to lead you away from God, to lead you to live as wolves.

We are still sheep among wolves! As a Christian, the world around you is seeking to fill your life with ungodly lies, ungodly habits, and ungodly desires. Just as Jesus warned the disciples that their own families would betray them, so today our own families and Christian friends will parrot Satan's lies to us. How many Christians have advised their loved ones to "do what makes you happy," even if the course of action is blatant sin? Where did we get the idea that doing something that God hates will make us happy? That doesn't come from God's Word. It is one of Satan's many lies. Those lies will devour our faith if we try to stand against them on our own.

But God still wants us here as sheep among wolves. God wants us here to 1) turn wolves into sheep, and 2) to keep us totally and only depending on him, trusting in him alone.

Because of the persecution that Christians will face in all times, Jesus tells us to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. God wants us to be shrewd, wise, prudent. If a sheep is going to live among wolves, it had better have a game plan, or it won't last too long, right? God wants us paying attention, thinking through situations ahead of time, planning how best to be sheep when surrounded by wolves. We are to be wise in our Christian walk.

But Jesus also wants us to be innocent. He doesn't want our wisdom to lead us down the wrong path. Our wisdom should never turn into any kind of compromise

with evil. Jesus doesn't want us to be so obsessed with surviving the wolves that we allow ourselves to become wolves, or that we live in constant fear of those wolves, always trying to hide ourselves from the world. We are also to be innocent, pursuing godly lives, building our lives on God's Word rather than on Satan's lies.

Have you ever tried putting together a spiritual game plan? It can be valuable. How are you going to keep yourself building on God's Word when Satan's lies are all around you? How are you going to live a godly life when all the world around you is pulling you toward an ungodly life? How are you going to live as a godly spouse or single person when the whole world is telling you that casual sex, pornography, adultery, and divorce are normal and healthy? How are you going to keep your career focused on serving God when the whole world around us is saying that earthly riches will give you true happiness? How are you going to love God above all things when the world just has so much fun to offer? How are you going to deal with sin in your own life when the world tells you to just do what makes you happy?

I heard the story of a man who had a bad buying habit. He would just see an ad for something, get excited about it, and buy the thing with no thought about his own finances or whether or not he needed the thing. But he thought about his problem, and he got an idea. He took a bowl, filled it with water, placed his credit card in the bowl, and put it all in the freezer. Now, whenever he was excited about buying something, he took the block of ice, set it on the counter, and if he still wanted to buy the thing when he was able to get the card out of the ice, he did. But this method forced him to think about what he was doing instead of getting carried away by his emotions and the excitement of the advertisement.

God encourages us to be wise and innocent. Think through what's coming ahead, but to always remain true to God's Word. If you know you often fall into sin in a given situation, think through ahead of time how you can avoid it. If you know you have an upcoming opportunity to speak God's truth to someone, consider beforehand what you can do or say and how that will affect you, the other person, and ultimately God's glory.

Now, we certainly can't be ready for EVERY situation. A lot of times, life just kind of happens to us. But we can prepare for the unexpected by filling ourselves up with God's Word. Reading the Bible every day, coming to church and Bible study

regularly, and all the while giving careful thought to what God's Word is saying to us, how God's Word addresses Satan's lies that have already burrowed into our heads; these things fill up our tanks so that when those unexpected events come our way, we have God's Word in our heads and on our hearts so that we can react in a godly way.

Jesus told his disciples not to worry about what to say because the Holy Spirit would speak through them. That was a promise specifically to Jesus' disciples. That's not an excuse for me to do no sermon prep and just assume God will speak through me when I stand in the pulpit! Neither is that an excuse for you and me to assume that everything we say comes from God. We need to be filling up our tanks with God's Word. When we are regularly in God's Word, when we are basing our lives and decisions and habits on what God's Word says, then we can confidently say that God will speak through us. But if we aren't filled up on God's Word, if I never read my Bible on my own, if I don't come to church and Bible study regularly, then I can be confident that my words absolutely do *not* come from God.

We are Sheep Among Wolves. But God still wants those wolves turned into sheep, and God still wants us depending on him alone. Therefore, we need to be in the Word. We need to be building our lives on the Word; every one of our actions, habits, thoughts. We could not earn our own salvation. God had to save us in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone. In the same way, we cannot stand against the wolves that surround us. But Jesus gives us the promise so that we might stand firm: Jesus has saved us. We can depend on him. God wants us depending only on him. So, stand firm in God's Word and you will be saved. Amen.