

If the kingdom of heaven published social statistics, we would expect that the crime rate would be low, the happiness index would be high, education would be strong, and health would be thriving. Here is another statistic that might not come to mind so quickly. In the kingdom of heaven, the unemployment rate is 0%. Every person in the kingdom is given work. The king sends each individual on a kingdom mission. You might think that your situation disqualifies you. You are too young, too old, too busy, or too weak. The truth is that we all think we are disqualified from serving the mission of the kingdom. The greater truth is that God doesn't. This message is for you.

This study of Matthew 10 considers how God sends us on mission for the kingdom. Matthew 10 features the second of five major teaching discourses in Matthew and is known as the Missionary Discourse. The principles of this teaching are deeply relevant for how we carry out the mission God has called us to. We should not take Matthew 10 as our direct orders for our mission. This was the calling of the apostles, during the life of Christ, only to the lost sheep of Israel. Later, in the Great Commission, they were sent to all nations. The specifics of the calling are individualized. But the principles of the calling in Matthew 10 apply to the calling God placed on us. We will consider the major themes through the lens of the four animals listed in verse 16; sheep, wolves, serpents, and doves.

First, we are to be convinced that God sends us for the kingdom. He has a work for us.

Second, we are given principles for how to carry out that calling.

Sheep

"I just want to be a sheep, baa, baa, baa, baa." Have you ever sung that song? It is Biblical! The way that God sends us is "as sheep". I thought about using the term sheepish. Then I looked it up and saw that it means to show embarrassment or shame or to be awkward. That is not what describes the calling of God. Let's use the term "sheep-like". The sheep is a symbol of the call to be **dependent**.

Notice the sheep-like dependence described in Matthew 10:1-12.

The fact that we are sent as sheep reminds us that we have a shepherd. We go where we are led. Look back to verse one and notice the leading of our shepherd. He is the one who "calls" us. The mission is his idea not ours. Verse two is the only time in Matthew that Jesus refers to his disciples as "apostles". The word apostle means "sent ones". When the words "sent out" are used in verse 5 and 16, they are translations of the Greek word "apostelló" (Also used by the demons in Matthew 8:31. That is an interesting thought of demons as "apostles". The point is that Jesus has the power to send us). We don't just go, we are sent. We don't just find work we are assigned work. We are not eagles, scouting out our own way. We are sheep who go where the shepherd leads us. We depend on the calling of our shepherd.

Additionally, in verse 1, we see that our shepherd is the one who gives us power. We, as sheep, are not called to go out in our own strength but in the strength we are given. Sheep don't need to be strong they need to be surrendered. They don't need to have great skill in navigating, they just need to be disciplined at following the voice of their shepherd. We depend on the power of our shepherd.

Notice in verse 6, Jesus sends the sheep to other sheep. He sends us on missions as equals with those we are serving. The mission is ruined by elitism. Superiority pollutes our service. We are prone to wander as they are. We need a shepherd as they do. We are sent to lost sheep as fellow sheep. We are not on a higher level, we are all dependent on the grace of God.

In verse 7 Jesus gives the instruction, "as you go, preach". Jesus didn't call them to make a big deal of themselves and become the center of attention with their preaching. He said, "as you go, preach". This suggests the call to a missionary lifestyle not a missionary event. Remember, sheep are herd animals. In fact, all four animals listed in verse 16 are listed in the plural. We are not sent to stand out. Sheep blend in. We are not called to independence but dependence.

Verse 9 gives us a wonderful sheep-like principle in the words "freely you have received, freely give". Remember, we were "given" power (v.1). We are not to worry about what to say because the words will be "given" to us (v.19). Just glance through the chapter and you will notice that the words "give" and "receive" are well represented; give is used 4 times (1, 8, 19, 42) and "receive" is used 11 times (8, 14, 40, 41). Sheep are not self-made, but are dependent upon the shepherd. Everything they have is given to them. Their mode of life is to freely receive and freely give.

The disciples are not sent out with an impressive gear list, but they are to be dependent upon others (v. 9-11). Some of us have a hard time receiving from others. While we should avoid becoming moochers, it is good for us to be in a position of needing and receiving support from others.

The chapter ends on this theme of giving and receiving (vv.40-42). We are to live in a constant mode of freely receiving from God and freely giving to others so that they might receive God. If we step out of sheep mode and become somebody in ourselves, we risk that they will receive us in our name as a righteous man (v.41). That is not what we are sent for. We are sent for the kingdom.

Wolves

We don't want to be like wolves. But we can expect that we will encounter some. Jesus said, "I send you out as sheep among wolves." Wolves are predators. They have instincts to kill.

I started working as a pastor in Salmon Idaho. In Salmon, the only topic that gets people more upset than wolves is environmentalists. They are the ones who released the wolves into their hunting grounds. The wolves kill all the other animals. Environmentalists claim that wolves

don't kill for sport (like those evil hunters do). The hunters look at the attacks that take out half a herd of elk and leave the meat to rot and they conclude that these wolves kill for fun. I had to agree with the hunters on this one, partially because all my church elders were local outdoorsmen. And partially because wolves are big, scary, aggressive and have an instinct to attack.

Wolf country is dangerous. And this is where Jesus sends missionaries for the kingdom. When we are sent for the kingdom we can expect difficulty, resistance, violence, and injustice. The wolf is a symbol of the call to be **vulnerable**. Sheep are vulnerable. They are not known for being vicious but soft and fluffy. Jesus is the one who chooses to send us out as sheep, knowing that we would be among wolves. He has intentionally called us to vulnerability.

Listen to how Jesus describes it in Matthew 10:17-26.

Now, just a few notes of commentary.

- **Verse 17** says that the wolves will “flog you in their synagogues”. It happens in synagogues. Religious people can be wolves too. In fact, history tells us that the strongest wolf-like forces have been religious. And prophecy tells us that the wolf-like forces that are soon to come are powered by a union of church and state. They will flog you in synagogues.
- **Verse 18** tells us that the persecution is “for my sake” and “as a testimony”. The reason we are persecuted should be for Jesus' sake. The opportunity in persecution is to be a witness.
- **Verses 24-25** remind us that Jesus was attacked by wolves and if we are following him we should expect the same.

The mission Jesus is sending you on is a hard mission. Jesus sends us out as sheep among wolves. It sounds like a bad plan. But since it is God's plan, we know it is not a mistake. When we are attacked we should not conclude that God is failing us but exactly the opposite.

Serpents

The word serpent has bad connotations. If you have negative feelings when you hear the word “snake”, you probably have stronger negative feelings when you hear the word “serpent”. Biblically and culturally, it has dark associations. But in this case, “serpent” is presented in a positive way. The serpent is a symbol of the call to be **wise**.

I don't know much about snakes. So, I googled “are snakes smart?” I learned that the King Cobra is considered to be the smartest snake. And I learned that, in general, snakes are not known for being intelligent. They have that mysterious look that leaves you never quite sure

what is going on in their head. But apparently, it is not a whole lot when compared to other animals.

I grew up in western Washington where the snakes were small and harmless. When I was 18, I took a road trip to Union College in Nebraska with some friends. Around sunset, we were driving along a section of road where apparently a truck had lost a bunch of rope. We passed several piles laying on the road and they seemed to be decent quality. So, I decided to stop and get some. That's when I learned that rattlesnakes like to coil on the road for heat. Mistaking a rattlesnake for a rope is not smart. But do you know who was even less smart? The snake that decided to lay on the road. That did not seem like a choice of a highly intelligent being.

The good news is that the serpent does not need a high IQ for us to understand what Jesus is saying. He tells us clearly that the serpent is a symbol of wisdom. The word (phronimos) can mean practically wise, sensible, prudent or intelligent. This is what Jesus intends to symbolize in the snake. We see similar ideas associated with snakes in Genesis 3.

Genesis 3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

The Hebrew word here is "arum" which means crafty, shrewd, or sensible. The serpent was more like that than any other animal. And who made it that way? The Lord God did. In Genesis 3 we see craftiness and shrewdness being used in an evil way. But it can be used in a holy way. We should bring this careful reasoning and crafty intelligence to the work of ministry.

Sheep have a reputation of being dumb. That is not a sheep-like characteristic that is meant to apply to those who live on mission for God. Missionaries are a force to be reckoned with. You might want to cuddle a sheep but you probably don't have that impulse when you see a serpent. Missionaries are not pushovers. Our willingness to endure persecution for the sake of Christ is not a sign of stupidity but the strength that comes in surrender. Yes, we are vulnerable sheep. Yes, we are sent among wolves. But we are wise.

The call to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves is a rare combination of virtues that usually exist on extreme opposite ends of the spectrum. In modern culture, snakes symbolize sneakiness and doves symbolize peace. That is not too far from the images of wisdom and innocence. The most intelligent people have the potential to be the most dangerous. Usually, the smartest among us aren't the kindest among us. It is rare to find someone with a gifted mind whose pure character is as impressive as their intellect. But this rare combination is what we are called to.

The first instruction after the call to be like serpents and doves is to "beware of people". We are to be wise in the way we relate to people. We are called to live with a high level of emotional intelligence. We all have a natural, individual level of EQ. But we can grow it, and we should for the kingdom. The work that requires the greatest mind power is not rocket science, it is

kingdom ministry. Employ your mind for Jesus. Seek to grow in intellect for the sake of the kingdom.

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The highest of all sciences is the science of soul saving. The greatest work to which human beings can aspire is the work of winning men from sin to holiness. For the accomplishment of this work, a broad foundation must be laid. A comprehensive education is needed—an education that will demand from parents and teachers such thought and effort as mere instruction in the sciences does not require. Something more is called for than the culture of the intellect. Education is not complete unless the body, the mind, and the heart are equally educated. The character must receive proper discipline for its fullest and highest development. All the faculties of mind and body are to be developed and rightly trained. It is a duty to cultivate and to exercise every power that will render us more efficient workers for God.

The mission the disciples were sent on included important work. Listen to the specifics Jesus calls them to.

Matthew 10:1 And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.

Matthew 10:7-8 And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay.

God calls us to be stewards of authority and power. He calls us to some high functioning activities. Ministry is not the work of dumb sheep but wise serpents.

I recently listened to a leadership book written by Navy Seals. They detailed the training and organization necessary to prioritize and execute under extreme pressure. We might have good theories but without disciplined training, the theories don't perform when we are surrounded by wolves. To be "wise as serpents" is to train our thinking with truth so thoroughly that it still guides our action when we are under attack. Here are some of those wisdom principles that keep us focused in battle.

God will provide!

Matthew 10:19- When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour.

God calls us to endurance!

Matthew 10:22- And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

God sees all the injustice and all you are giving!

Matthew 10:26- So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.

The enemy cannot take what matters most!

Matthew 10:28- And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

No matter how difficult the battle, God still loves you!

Matthew 10:28 & 29- Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.

Wisdom remembers these truths in the heat of battle and the truth guides their behavior. Be wise as serpents.

Doves

The Greek word translated as innocent is “akeraios”. It literally means unmixed. It is only used three times in the New Testament. It could be translated pure, simple, unsophisticated, sincere, or blameless. The KJV famously translates the word as harmless. I am going to choose pure as the word to summarize our calling to be dove-like. The dove is a symbol of the call to be **pure**.

There is another word that Jesus uses 7 times in Matthew 10 that helps us to understand the call to purity. It is the word “worthy” (vv. 10, 11, 13, 37, 38). Right away, this word seems problematic. We are not worthy. We can’t do anything to become worthy. The economy of the kingdom is built on grace. So, what is the business about being worthy?

The Greek word translated “worthy” is axios. It can be translated as deserving, comparable, suitable. It is derived from the verb aksō which means "to weigh". It is about having value (or weight) that matches what is advertised. So axios is worthy in the sense that what is claimed on the outside is true of what is found on the inside. In Matthew 10, “worthy” is not a description of those who earn salvation but of those whose lives are consistent with the spirit of God they claim to follow. It is closely related to faithfulness or purity. Now, consider the 7 uses of “worthy” in this chapter.

Verse 10- Nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is **worthy** of his food.

Verse 11- And into whatsoever city or town ye shall enter, enquire who in it is **worthy**; and there abide till ye go thence.

Verse 13- And if the house be **worthy**, let your peace come upon it: but if it be not **worthy**, let your peace return to you.

Verse 37- He that loveth father or mother more than me is not **worthy** of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

Verse 38- And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not **worthy** of me.

Now remember that being wise as serpents and innocent as doves is in the context of how we relate to people (“beware of men” v. 17). And the closest we come to a definition of “worthy” in the chapter is verse 37 when we see that worthy means to love God more than anything else. We cannot be worthy if the definition is to earn salvation. We can be worthy if the definition is to love God more than anything.

In this chapter we see the concept of pleasing God more than we please people featured several times. Consider the following verse through the lens of loving God supremely.

Matthew 1:22 And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Matthew 1:32-33 So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 1:38-39 And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

The way that we live worthy or pure, as sheep among wolves, is to love God more than anything else. Jesus has not called us to be people pleasers. He has not sent us to pursue comfort as our highest value. If there is anything we love more than God, we are not worthy, we are mixed, we are impure.

A guiding principle in our mission for God is to be pure in our love for him. Be as innocent as doves.

Every citizen of the kingdom is sent by God for the kingdom. Be dependent like a sheep. Expect to be vulnerable like a sheep among wolves. Be wise like a serpent. Be pure like a dove.