

Wise as Serpents, Harmless as Doves

by Thomas Watson

Thomas Watson's sermon emphasizes the necessity for Christians to embody both wisdom and innocence in their lives as they navigate challenges and fulfill their divine commission.

Scripture: Proverbs 4:7, Proverbs 19:11, Matthew 10:16, Luke 4:29, Philippians 4:4, 1 Timothy 6:17, James 3:17, 1 Peter 5:5

Topics: "Christian Living", "Spiritual Wisdom"

Description

Thomas Watson preaches about the importance of being wise as serpents and harmless as doves, emphasizing the need for Christians to unite prudence and holiness in their lives. He highlights the Apostles' commission, the foretold dangers they faced, and the instructions given by Christ. Watson explains that Christians must be both wise and innocent, showing examples from biblical figures like Moses, Daniel, and Paul who embodied this balance of wisdom and innocence. He urges believers to be prudent in their actions, yet maintain their integrity, avoiding sin while navigating through challenges and dangers.

Transcript

Wise as Serpents--Harmless as Doves

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"Be wise as serpents--and harmless as doves." Matthew 10:16

The Apostle says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration," 2 Timothy 3:16. God's Word is compared to a lamp for its enlightening quality, Psalm 119:105, and to refined silver for its enriching quality, Psalm 12:6. Among other parts of Sacred Writ, this text is not the least: "Be wise as serpents--and harmless as doves." This is the speech of our blessed Savior. His lips were a tree of life which fed many. His works were miracles. His words were oracles--and deserve to be engraved upon our hearts as with the point of a diamond. This is a golden sentence, "Be wise as serpents--and harmless as doves." Our Lord Jesus, in this chapter:

first, gives His Apostles their commission;

second, He foretells their danger;

third, He gives them several instructions.

I. Christ gives His Apostles their COMMISSION. Before they went abroad to preach, Christ ordained them, verse 5, "These twelve, Jesus sent forth." Those who exercise in the ministerial function must have a lawful call. Hebrews 5:4, "No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God." Christ gave not only the Apostles and Prophets a call to their office (who were extraordinary ministers)--but even pastors and teachers, (who are ordinary ministers) Ephesians 4:11.

QUESTION. But if one has gifts, is this not sufficient to the ministerial office?

ANSWER. No. As grace is not sufficient to make a minister, so neither are gifts. Therefore it is observable that the Scripture puts a difference between gifting and commissioning. Romans 10:15, "How shall they preach unless they are sent?" If gifts were enough to constitute a minister, the Apostle would have said, "How shall they preach unless they are gifted?" But he says, "Unless they are sent," which denotes a lawful call into the office. The attorney who pleads at the bar, may have as good gifts as the judge who sits upon the bench--but he must have a lawful commission before he sits as a judge. If it is thus in civil matters, much more in church matters which are of higher concern. Those, therefore, who usurp the work of the ministry without being solemnly set apart for it, reveal more pride than zeal--and they can expect no blessing. Jeremiah 23:32 says, "I did not send or appoint them. They do not benefit these people in the least." So much for the first, the Apostles' commission; "Those twelve, Jesus sent forth."

II. Christ foretells their DANGER. Verse 16, "Behold I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves!" The Apostles were going about a glorious, but hazardous work. They would meet with enemies as fierce and savage as wolves. As all who will live godly in Christ shall meet with sufferings, so commonly Christ's ambassadors encounter the deepest trials. Most of the Apostles died by the hands of tyrants. Peter was crucified with his head downwards. Luke the Evangelist was executed on an olive-tree. John was cast by Domitian into a vessel of scalding oil. The emperor Maximinus gave charge to his officers to put none to death, but the leaders and pastors of the church.

The ministers are Christ's ensign-bearers to carry His colors; therefore, they are most shot at. They hold forth His truth. Philippians 1:17, "I am set for the defense of the gospel." The Greek word alludes to a soldier who is set in the forefront of the battle, and has all the bullets flying about his ears. The minister's work is to part between men and their sins--and this causes opposition! When Paul preached against Diana, all the city was in an uproar, Acts 29. This may stir up prayer for Christ's ministers--that they may be able to withstand the assaults of the enemy, 2 Thessalonians 3:2.

III. Christ gives the Apostles their INSTRUCTIONS, whereof this text was one, "Be wise as serpents--and harmless as doves." Note:

1. The exhortation, "Be wise."
2. The simile, "as serpents."
3. The qualification of this wisdom, a wisdom mixed with innocence, "harmless as doves."

This union of the dove and the serpent is hard to find. Matthew 24:45, "Who then is a wise and faithful servant?" On which place, said Chrysostom, it is a hard matter to find one who is both faithful and wise. Faithful, there is the dove; wise, there is the serpent. It is hard to find both. If one would seek for a faithful man, no doubt, he may find many. If one would seek for a wise man, he may find many. But, if he seeks

for one both wise and faithful--it is hard to find. It is possible, though not common.

Moses was a man "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians," Acts 7:22. There was the wisdom of the serpent. And he was the meekest man alive. Numbers 12:3, "Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth." There was the innocence of the dove.

Daniel was an excellent person. Daniel 5:14, "Excellent wisdom is found in you." There was the prudence of the serpent. Daniel 6:4, "The administrators and princes began searching for some fault in the way Daniel was handling his affairs, but they couldn't find anything to criticize. He was faithful and honest and always responsible." Behold, here, the innocence of the dove.

Look at Paul, Acts 23:6, "When Paul realized that some members of the high council were Sadducees and some were Pharisees, so he shouted, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, as were all my ancestors!" By this speech, Paul got all the Pharisees on his side. Here was the wisdom of the serpent; and verse 1, "I have always lived before God in all good conscience!" Here was the innocence of the dove. How lovely is this union of the dove and serpent!

The Scripture joins these two together, meekness and wisdom, James 3:13. Wisdom, there is the serpent; meekness, there is the dove. This beautifies a Christian, when he has the serpent's eye in the dove's head. We must have innocence with our wisdom--else our wisdom is but craftiness. And we must have wisdom with our innocence--else our innocence is but weakness. We must have the innocence of the dove--that we may not harm others; and we must have the wisdom of the serpent--that others may not harm us. We must have the innocence of the dove--that we may not betray the truth; and the wisdom of the serpent--that we may not betray ourselves. In short, innocence without wisdom is too weak to be safe. Wisdom without innocence is too subtle to be good. When wisdom and innocence appear together, they preview the soul's happiness.

DOCTRINE. Christians must be both wise and innocent.

I. Firstly, Christians must be WISE. "Be wise as serpents."

Concerning wisdom in GENERAL. Solomon said, "Wisdom is the principal thing," Proverbs 4:7. Wisdom is better than riches, "Happy is the person who finds wisdom and gains understanding. For the profit of wisdom is better than silver, and her wages are better than gold. Wisdom is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her!" Proverbs 3:13-15. If the mountains were pearls, if every sand of the sea was a diamond--they would not be comparable to wisdom. Without wisdom, a person is like a ship without a pilot, in danger of wrecking upon the rocks. Job sets forth the eulogy and praise of wisdom, Job 28:13,18, "The price of wisdom is above rubies." The ruby is a precious stone, transparent, of a red fiery color. But wisdom casts a more sparkling color than the ruby. It makes us shine as angels. No chain of pearl you wear so adorns you--as wisdom. Wisdom consists chiefly in three things:

Knowledge to discern wherein happiness lies;

skill to judge what will be the fittest means to conduce to it;

activity to prosecute those things which will certainly accomplish that end. So much for wisdom in general.

More PARTICULARLY, wisdom is variously distinguished. It is either natural, moral, or sacred.

1. A natural wisdom is seen in finding out the secrets of nature. Aristotle was, by some of the ancients, called an eagle fallen from the clouds; because he had so profound an insight into the causes of things. This natural wisdom is adorning--but it is not sufficient to salvation. Jerome brings in Aristotle with his syllogisms, and Tully with his rhetoric, crying out in hell.

2. A moral wisdom consists in two things--the rejection of those things which are harmful; and the choosing of those things which are beneficial. This is called prudence. Knowledge without prudence may do harm; many a man's wit has undone him, for lack of wisdom.

3. A sacred wisdom is knowing God, who is the supreme and sovereign Good. Greece was counted the eye of the world for wisdom, and Athens the eye of Greece; but neither of them knew God, Acts 17:23, "I found an altar with this inscription--To the unknown God." To know God, in whom is both truth and goodness, is the masterpiece of wisdom. 1 Chronicles 28:9, "And you, Solomon my son--know the God of your father." And this knowledge of God is through Christ. Christ is the looking-glass in which the face of God is seen, Colossians 1:15.

We know God rightly, when we know Him not only with a knowledge of speculation, but appropriation, Psalm 48:14, "This God is our God." This knowledge of God is the most sublime wisdom, therefore, it is called wisdom from above, James 3:17.

But to come nearer to the text and speak of the wisdom of the serpent: "Be wise as serpents."

QUESTION. But must we in everything, be like the serpent?

ANSWER. No, our Savior did not mean that in everything we should imitate the serpent. I shall show you how we should not be like the serpent--and how we should be like the serpent.

How we should NOT be like the serpent:

1. The serpent eats dust. Isaiah 65:25, "Dust shall be the serpent's food." It was a curse upon the serpent. Thus we should not be like the serpent, feeding immoderately upon earthly things. It is absurd for him who has a heaven-born soul, capable of communion with God--to greedily eat the serpent's food. A Christian has better food to feed on--the heavenly manna, the precious promises, the body and blood of Christ. It is counted a miracle to find a diamond in a gold mine; but it is as great a miracle to find Christ, the pearl of great price, in an earthly heart. The lap-wing wears a little coronet on its head--yet feeds on dung. To have a crown of profession on the head--yet feed inordinately on these dunghill-comforts, is unworthy of a Christian.

What a poor contemptible thing is the world! It cannot fill the heart. If Satan should take a Christian up to the top of the pinnacle and show him all the kingdoms and glory of the world--what could he show him but a pleasant delusion? There is a lawful use which God allows of these outward things--but the sin is in the excess. The bee may suck a little honey from the flower--but put it in a barrel of honey, and it is drowned. The wicked are thus characterized. Philippians 3:19, "Who mind earthly things." They are like Saul, "hidden among the stuff." We should be like eagles--flying aloft towards heaven; and not as serpents--creeping upon the earth and licking the dust!

2. The serpent is deceitful. The serpent uses many shifts, and glides so cunningly that we cannot trace him. This was one of those four things which wise Agur could not find out, "the way of the serpent upon a rock," Proverbs 30:19. The serpent is a deceitful creature. We should not, in this sense, be like the

serpent, deceitful. Naturally, we too much resemble the serpent for fraud and collusion. Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things."

First, deceit towards man:

(1) To pretend friendship--to cover malice with pretenses of love--to commend and detest; to flatter and hate; to have a Judas' kiss and a Joab's sword!

(2) To pretend honesty--to pretend just dealing--yet use false weights.

Second, deceit towards God. To draw near to God with the lips, while the heart is far from Him. To serve God--and seek ourselves; to pretend to love God--and yet be in league with sin. We should not in this sense, be like the serpent--deceitful and given to shifts. Oh, be upright! Be what you seem to be! God loves plainness of heart, Psalm 51:6. The plainer the diamond is, the more it sparkles; the plainer the heart is, the more it sparkles in God's eye! What a commendation Christ gave Nathaniel! John 1:47, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit."

3. The serpent cast the coat--but another new coat comes in its place. In this we should not be like the serpent, to cast the coat, to cast off one sin, and have another sin as bad, come in its place. The drunkard leaves his drunkenness because it impairs his health, his credit, his purse--and falls to the sin of deceit. The prodigal leaves his prodigality--and turns miser. This is as if one disease should leave a man--and he should fall into a worse disease. Oh, do not be like the serpent, who casts one coat--and another comes in its place! This is like the man in the gospel, who had one devil go out of him--and seven worse demons came in its place! Matthew 12:45.

4. The serpent is a venomous creature; it is full of poison, Deuteronomy 33:24. In this, do not be like the serpent. It is said of wicked men that their poison is like the poison of a serpent, Psalm 58:4. What is this poison? It is the poison of malice. Malice is the devil's picture. Lust makes men brutish--and malice makes them devilish! Malice carries in it its own punishment. A malicious man, to hurt another, will injure himself. Quintillian speaks of one who had a garden of flowers, and he poisoned his flowers that his neighbor's bees, sucking from them, might be poisoned and die. Oh, do not be venomous like the serpent!

Malice is mental murder; you may kill a man and never touch him. I John 3:15, "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer." Malice spoils all your good duties. The malicious man defiles his prayer, poisons the sacramental cup, and eats and drinks his own damnation. I have read of one who lived in malice and, being asked how he could say the Lord's prayer, he answered, "I leave out those words--As we forgive those who trespass against us." Augustine brings in God replying thus to him, "Because you do not say My prayer, therefore, I will not hear your prayer." The malicious man is not likely to enjoy either earth or heaven; not the earth, for the "meek shall inherit the earth," Matthew 5:5; nor is he likely to enjoy heaven, for God "will beautify the meek with salvation," Psalm 149:4. The malicious man is cut off both from earth and heaven.

5. The serpent is given to hissing. In this, do not be like the serpent, hissing out reproaches and invectives against the saints and people of God. They are the seed of the serpent--who hiss at godliness. The Lord will one day reckon with men for all their hard speeches, Jude 15. Lucian was such a one who hissed out and scoffed against religion; and, as a just judgment of God, he was afterwards torn in pieces by dogs.

6. The serpent stops her ear. It is an obstinate deafness, Psalm 58:4, "They are like the deaf adder, that stops up its ears." In this, do not be like the serpent, obstinately stopping up your ears to the voice of God's Word. While God calls you to repent of sin, do not be as the serpent to stop your ear, Zechariah 7:11, "They refused to hearken, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear." The Word denounces threatenings against sin--but many, instead of being like the publican, smiting on their breast--are as deaf adders, stopping their ears! If you shut your ear against God's Word, take heed that God does not shut heaven against you! If God cries to you to repent--and you will not hear; when you cry for mercy--God will not hear. Zechariah 7:13, "Since they refused to listen when I called to them, I would not listen when they called to me, says the Lord Almighty."

7. The serpent casts her coat--but keeps her sting. In this sense, do not be like the serpent, casting off the outward acts of sin--and keeping the love of sin. He whose heart is in love with any sin, is a hypocrite.

A man may forbear sin--yet retain the love of it. He may forbear the act of gross sin--for fear of hell. This is like the man who forbears a dish he loves--for fear it should bring a disease or ailment upon him. A man may forsake sin--yet keep the love of sin. He may forsake sin either out of policy or necessity.

First, policy. Vice will impair his health--and eclipse his credit. Therefore, out of policy, he will forsake it.

Second, necessity. Perhaps he can follow the trade of sin no longer. The adulterer has grown old--and the prodigal has grown poor. Either the purse fails--or the strength. Thus, a man may refrain from the act of sin--yet retain the love of sin. This is like the serpent which casts off her coat--but keeps her sting!

Oh, take heed of this! Herein do not be like the serpent. Remember that saying of Jerome, "It is worse to love sin--than to commit it." A man may commit sin through a strong temptation, or out of ignorance. And, when he knows it to be a sin--he is sorry for it. But he who loves sin, his will is in the sin--and that aggravates it, and is like the dye which makes the wool of a crimson color.

8. Serpents are chased away with sweet perfumes. The sweet odor of the storax tree will drive the serpent away. In this, do not be like the serpent, being driven away with the sweet perfumes of holiness. Carnal hearts are only for things which delight the senses. They will discourse of news or money. Here they are in their element; but let a man bring with him the sweet perfume of pious discourse, let him talk of Christ, of living by faith--and this spiritual perfume will drive them away! Oh, do not be in this like the serpent! How do you think to live with the saints in heaven--if you cannot endure their company here? You hate the sweet savor of their ointments--the fragrant perfume of their graces.

9. The serpent no sooner casts his skin--but he eats it up again (as is noted of the stellio, a kind of serpent). In this, do not be like the serpent, to forsake sin--and then take it up again. 2 Peter 2:22, "A dog returns to its own vomit, and, a sow, after washing itself, wallows in the mud." Such were Demas and Julian. Many, after a divorce from sin, espouse their sins again. This is as if one's fever should leave him a while--and then come back again. The devil seemed to be cast out--but came again the second time; and the end of that man is worse than his beginning, Luke 11:26, because his sin is greater. He sins knowingly and willfully--and his damnation will be greater.

10. Serpents are great lovers of wine. Pliny, who writes the natural history, said, "If serpents come where wine is, they drink insatiably." In this, do not be like the serpent. Though the Scripture allows the use of wine, 1 Timothy 5:23--yet it forbids the excess, Ephesians 5:18, "Do not be drunk with wine, wherein is excess." Do not be like the serpent in this, being "lovers of wine."

Because this sin of drunkenness so abounds in this age, I shall enlarge upon the evils of drunkenness. It is said of the old world, "people went on eating and drinking--until the flood came and destroyed them all!" Luke 17:27. Drinking is not a sin--but the meaning is they drank to intemperance. They disordered themselves with drink and God let them have liquor enough. First they were drowned in wine--and then in water!

There is no sin which more defaces God's image, than drunkenness. It disguises a person and even unmans him. Drunkenness makes him have the throat of a fish, the belly of a swine, and the head of an donkey! Drunkenness is the shame of nature, the extinguisher of reason, the shipwreck of chastity, and the murder of conscience. Drunkenness is hurtful for the body. The cup kills more than the cannon.

Drunkenness fills the eyes with fire, the legs with water, and turns the body into a hospital! But the greatest hurt is what it does to the soul. Excess of wine breeds the worm of conscience. The drunkard is seldom reclaimed by repentance, and the ground of it is partly because, by this sin--the senses are so enchanted, reason is so impaired, and lust is so inflamed. Partly, it is judicial, the drunkard being so besotted with this sin. God says of him, as of Ephraim, Hosea 4:17, "Ephraim is joined to idols--let him alone!" "This man is joined to his cups--let him alone! Let him drown himself in liquor, until he scorches himself in fire!"

How many woes has God pronounced against this sin. Isaiah 28:1, "Woe to the drunkards of Ephraim!" Joel 1:5, "Howl you drinkers of wine!" Drunkenness excludes a person from heaven. 1 Corinthians 6:10, "Drunkards shall not inherit the kingdom of God." A man cannot go reeling to heaven. King Solomon makes an oration full of invectives against this sin, Proverbs 23:29-30, "Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has babbling? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? Those who linger over wine!"

"Who has strife?" Excessive drink breed quarrels.

"Who has babbling?" When one is drunk, his tongue runs; he will reveal any secrets of his friend.

"Who has bloodshot eyes?" Bloodshot eyes comes sometimes from weeping--but too often from drinking; and what is the outcome? verse 32. "In the end it bites like a poisonous serpent; it stings like a viper!" The wine smiles in the glass--but stings in the conscience!

Drunkenness is a sin against all the Ten Commandments.

1. Drunkenness casts off the true God. Hosea 4:11, "Wine takes away the heart"; it takes the heart off from God.
2. It makes the belly a god. Philippians 3:19. To this god, the drunkard pours drink-offerings; there is a breach of the second commandment.
3. The drunkard in his cups takes God's name in vain by his oaths.
4. The drunkard makes no difference of day. He is seldom sober on a Sabbath. On that day, he worships Bacchus.
5. The drunkard honors neither his natural father, nor the magistrate, his civil father. He will be drunk, though the laws of the land forbid it.

6. The drunkard commits murder. Alexander killed his friend Clytus when he was drunk, for whom he would have given half his kingdom when he was sober.

7. The drunkard's wine proves lust. Augustine calls wine the enflamer of lust. "I never believe a drunken man to be chaste," said Jerome.

8. The drunkard is a thief. He spends that money upon his drunken lust, which should have been given to charitable uses. So he robs the poor.

9. The drunkard is a slanderer. He cares not, when he is on the ale-bench, how he defames and belies others. When he has taken his full cups, he is now fit to take a false oath.

10. The drunkard sins against the tenth commandment, for he covets to get another's estate, by circumvention and extortion, that he may be the better able to follow his drunken trade. Thus he sins against the ten commandments.

If this sin of drunkenness is not reformed, I pray God, the sword is not made drunk with our blood. And, whereas some will go to shift off this sin from themselves, that they are no drunkards, because they have not drunk away their reason and senses, they are not so far gone in drink that they cannot go. He is a drunkard, said Solomon, who tarries long at the wine, Proverbs 23:30. He who sits at it from morning to night, who drinks away his precious time--though he does not drink away his reason. He is a drunkard who drinks more than does him good, and that, though he is not himself drunk--yet he makes another drunk, Habakkuk 2:15, "Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk!"

Oh, I beseech you, do not be in this like the serpent, lovers of wine! This, I fear, is one cause why the Word preached does so little good to many in this city. They drink away sermons. They do as the hunted deer. When it is wounded--it runs to the water and drinks. So, when they have been at a sermon, and the arrows of reproof have wounded their conscience--they run presently and drink away those convictions. They steep the sermon in wine. The tavern bell does them more harm--than the sermon-bell does them good. Thus you have seen wherein we should not be like serpents.

How we should be LIKE the serpent:

We should be like the serpent in prudence and wisdom. "Be wise as serpents." The serpent is a most prudent creature; therefore, the devil made use of the serpent to deceive our first parents because it was such a subtle creature. Genesis 3:1, "The serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field." There is a natural wisdom and subtlety in every part of the serpent, and we should labor to imitate them and be wise as serpents.

1. The serpent has a prudence and subtlety in his EYE. He has a singular sharpness of sight. Therefore, among the Grecians, a serpent's eye was a proverbial speech for one of a quick understanding. In this, we should be like the serpent. Get the serpent's eye; have a quick insight into the mysteries of the Christian religion. Knowledge is the beauty and ornament of a Christian. Proverbs 14:18, "The prudent are crowned with knowledge." Get the serpent's eye, be divinely illuminated. Faith without knowledge is presumption; zeal without knowledge is blind passion, Proverbs 19:2. Without knowledge, the heart is not good. For one to say he has a good heart who has no knowledge, is as if one should say he has a good eye when he has no sight. In this, be like the serpent--of a quick understanding.

2. The serpent has a prudence and subtlety in his EAR. The serpent will not be deluded with the voice of the charmer, but stops its ear. In this, we must be wise as serpents, stopping our ears to false teachers who are the devil's charmers.

We must stop our ears to Arminian teachers who place the chief power in the will, as if that were the helm that turns about the soul in conversion. 1 Corinthians 4:7, "Who makes you to differ from another?" Said one, "I have made myself to differ." Be as the serpent: stop your ears to such doctrine.

We must stop our ears to Socinian teachers who raze the foundation of all religion, and deny Christ's divinity. This the Apostle calls a damnable heresy, 2 Peter 2:1.

We must stop our ears to Popish teachers who teach merit, indulgences, and transubstantiation; who teach that the pope is the head of the church. Christ is called "the head of the church," Ephesians 5:23. For the pope to be head is to make the church monstrous--to have two heads. Popish teachers teach the people nonsense and blasphemy; they cause the people to pray without understanding, to obey without reason, and to believe without sense. It is a damnable religion; therefore, worshiping the beast and drinking the cup of God's indignation are put together, Revelation 14:9. Oh, in this be "wise as serpents." Stop your ears to the charming of false teachers! God has given His people this wisdom to stop their ears to heretics. John 10:5, "A stranger they will not follow--but will flee from him."

3. The serpent has a chief care to defend his HEAD--a blow there is deadly! So in this we should be wise as serpents; our chief care should be to defend our head from error. The plague in the head is worst. Loose principles breed loose practices. If the head is tainted with erroneous opinions, such as--that believers are free from the moral law, that there is no resurrection, that we may do evil that good may come of it--what sin will this not lead to? Oh, keep your head! Error is a spiritual gangrene, 2 Timothy 2:17, which spreads, and if not presently cured, is mortal. Heresies destroy the doctrine of faith; they rend the mantle of the church's peace, and eat out the heart of religion.

The Gnostics, as Epiphanius observes, not only perverted the minds of their proselytes--but brought them at last to immorality. Error damns as well as vice. Vice is like killing with a pistol; and error killing with poison. Oh, be wise as serpents; defend your head! "Be wise as serpents--and harmless as doves." Our Savior Christ here commends to us the wisdom of the serpent and the innocence of the dove. The elect are called wise virgins, Matthew 25:4. Virgins, there is the dove; wise, there is the serpent. We must have innocence with our wisdom--or else our wisdom is but craftiness; and we must have wisdom with our innocence--or else our innocence is but weakness. We must have the innocence of the dove that we may not harm others and we must have the wisdom of the serpent that others may not harm us.

This union of the dove and serpent is hard to find--but it is possible. The most famous instance of wisdom and innocence was in our Savior. When the Jews came to Him with an ensnaring question, Mark 12:14, "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?" Christ answered wisely, verse 17, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's--and to God the things that are God's." Do not deny Caesar his civil right--nor God His religious worship. Let your loyalty be mixed with piety. Here He showed the wisdom of the serpent.

And would you see Christ's innocence? 1 Peter 2:22, "There was no deceit found in His mouth; who, when He was reviled, reviled not again." He opened His mouth in praying for His enemies--but not in reviling them. Behold here the innocence of the dove.

II. Christians must be HARMLESS. The second thing I am to speak of is the dove: "be harmless as doves." The dove is an excellent creature. It was so acceptable that, in the old law, God would have the dove offered in sacrifice. The Holy Spirit, when He would appear in a visible shape, assumed the likeness of a dove, Matthew 3:16.

We should be as doves in three respects:

- (1) In respect of meekness;
- (2) In respect of innocence;
- (3) In respect of purity.

1. In respect of MEEKNESS. The dove is the emblem of meekness; it is without gall. We should be as doves for meekness; we must avoid unruly anger, which is a temporary madness. We must be without the gall of bitterness and revenge. We must be of mild spirits, praying for our enemies. So did Stephen, Acts 7:60, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." This dove-like meekness is the best jewel and ornament we can wear. 1 Peter 3:4, "The ornament of a meek spirit, which in the sight of God, is of great price." Anger disfigures; meekness adorns.

2. We should be as doves for INNOCENCE. The innocence of the dove is seen in two things: Not to deceive and not to hurt.

Not to deceive. As the dove is without gall, so it is without guile. It does not deceive. Thus we should be as the dove, without fraud and craft. A holy simplicity is commendable, Romans 16:19, "I would have you simple concerning evil." To be a bungler at sin, not to have the art to beguile, is a good simplicity; as Nathaniel, in whose spirit there is no guile, John 1:47. Where is this dovelike innocence to be found? We live in an age where there are more foxes than doves. People are full of guile; they study nothing but deceit, so that one knows not how to deal with them. Psalm 12:2, "With a double heart do they speak."

Not to hurt. The dove has no horns or talons to hurt--only wings to defend itself by flight. Other creatures are commonly well-armed: the lion has its paw, the boar its tusk, the ram its horns--but the dove is a most harmless creature. It has nothing with which to offend. Thus we should be as doves for harmlessness. We should not do wrong to others--but rather suffer wrong ourselves. Such a dove was Samuel, 1 Samuel 12:3, "Whose ox have I taken? or whose donkey have I taken? or whom have I defrauded?" He did not get men's estates into his hands, or raise himself upon the ruins of others. How rare is it to find such doves! Surely, they are flown away! How many birds of prey are there! Micah 7:2, "Godly people have vanished from the land; there is no one upright among the people." These are not doves but vultures! They travail with mischief, and are in pain until they bring forth.

3. We should be as doves for PURITY. The dove is the emblem of purity. It loves the purest air; it feeds on pure grain. The raven feeds on the carcass--but the dove feeds pure. Thus, let us be as doves for sanctity, cleansing ourselves from all pollution both of flesh and spirit, 2 Corinthians 7:1. Christ's dove is pure, Song of Solomon 5:2, "My dove, my undefiled one." Let us keep pure, among dregs. 1 Timothy 5:22, "Keep yourself pure." Better have a rent in the flesh--than a hell in the conscience! The dove is a chaste, pure creature; let us be doves for purity.

USE 1. See here the nature of a godly Christian: he is both wise and innocent. He has so much of the serpent that he does not forfeit his discretion--and so much of the dove that he does not defile his

conscience. A godly man is looked upon by a carnal eye--as weak and naive--as having something of the dove, but nothing of the serpent. To believe in unseen realities, to choose sufferings rather than sin--is counted as folly. But the world is mistaken in a believer. He has his eyes in his head--he knows what he does. He is prudent as well as holy; he is wise who finds the pearl of great price. He is wise who provides for eternity. He is the wisest man who has wit to save his soul; he is wise who makes him his friend--who shall be his judge. The godly man acts both the politician and the divine; he retains his ingenuity--yet he does not part with his integrity.

USE 2. Reproof. It reproofs them who have too much of the serpent--but nothing of the dove. Jeremiah 4:22, "Wise to do evil--but to do good they have no knowledge." These are like the devil who retains his subtlety--but not his innocence.

We have many in this age, like the serpent for craftiness. Men have the headpiece of subtlety--but lack the breastplate of honesty. They are wise to contrive sin and to forge plots--to study compliance rather than conscience. The port they aim at is preferment; the compass they sail by is policy; the pilot that steers them is Satan! These have the craftiness of the serpent, "They are wise to do evil."

They are like the serpent for harm. You know the fiery serpents stung Israel. These have the sting of the serpent. They have a sting in their tongues, stinging the people of God with bitter slanders and invectives. Such stinging serpents were Nero, Diocletian, and Julian, and their spirit is yet alive in the world. These have too much of the serpent in them--but nothing of the dove. 2 Peter 2:3, "their damnation does not slumber."

USE 3. Exhortation. To put in practice our Savior's counsel in the text, join the serpent and the dove together: wisdom and holiness. Here lies the knot; this is the great difficulty--to unite these two together, the serpent and the dove, prudence and innocence. If you separate these two, you spoil all.

QUESTION. How does a Christian join these two together--the serpent and the dove, prudence and holiness?

ANSWER. This I shall answer in twelve particulars:

1. To be wise and innocent consists in this: to be sensible of an injury--yet not revenge it. A Christian is not a stoic--nor yet a fury. He is so wise that he knows when an injury is done him--but so holy that he knows how to pass it by. This is a most excellent temper of soul. I almost said "angelic." As the wind allays the heat of the air, so grace allays the heat of revenge. Moses herein showed a mixture of the serpent and the dove. Miriam murmured against him, Numbers 12:2, "Has the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses?" Is he the only prophet to declare God's mind to us? Moses was so wise as to discern her pride and slighting of him--yet so meek as to bury the injury. When God struck her with leprosy, he prayed for her. Numbers 12:13, "Heal her now, O God, I beseech You." And, upon his prayer, she was cured of her leprosy. A godly Christian has so much wisdom as to discern his enemy's malice--but so much grace as to conquer his own malice. He knows it is the glory of a man to pass by a transgression, Proverbs 19:11. Though a Christian has so much prudence as to vindicate himself--yet he has so much goodness as not to avenge himself. Behold here the serpent and the dove united--sagacity and innocence.

2. The mixing of wisdom and innocence is seen in this: to be humble--but not base. Humility is part of the dove's innocence. 1 Peter 5:5, "Be clothed with humility." Paul, though the chief of the Apostles, calls himself the least of saints. A gracious soul has low thoughts of himself, and carries himself lowly toward

others; but, though he is humble--he is not base. Though he will not saucily resist his superiors--he will not sinfully humor them. Though he will not do such proud actions as to make his enemies hate him--yet he will not do such sordid actions as to make them despise him. Here is the serpent and the dove united.

A godly Christian is so humble as to oblige others--but not so unworthy as to disobey God. Paul, as far as he could with a good conscience, became "all things to all, that he might save some," 1 Corinthians 9:20, 22; but he would not break a commandment to gratify any person. When God's glory lay at stake, who was more resolute than Paul? Galatians 2:5. The three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace were humble; they gave the king his title of honor--but they were not sordidly timorous. Daniel 3:18, "Be it known unto you, O king, that we will not serve your gods!" Though they showed reverence to the king's person--yet no reverence to the idol he had set up. A godly Christian will not do anything below himself--nor ever cater to men's lusts. He is humble (there he shows the innocence of the dove); but not base (there he shows the wisdom of the serpent).

3. The prudence of the serpent and innocence of the dove is seen in this: to reprove the sin--yet love the person. We are commanded to reprove, Leviticus 19:17, "'Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly--so you will not share in his guilt.'" Not to reprove sin--is to approve it; but this sword of reproof is a dangerous weapon, if it is not well-handled. To reprove and yet love is to act both the serpent and the dove.

QUESTION. How may a Christian so reprove sin, as to show love to the person?

ANSWER. In taking a fit season to reprove another; that is, when his anger is over. For example, when God rebuked Adam, He came to him, in the cool of the day, Genesis 3:8. So, when we are to reprove any, we are to come to them when their spirits are more cool and fit to receive a reproof. To reprove a man when he is in a passion, is to give strong drink in a fever--it does more harm than good. By observing a fit season, we show both prudence and holiness; we reveal discretion as well as affection.

Reproving sin so as to show love to the person is seen in this: when, though we tell him plainly of his sin--yet it is in mild, not provoking words. 2 Timothy 2:25, "Instructing his opponents with gentleness." Peter tells the Jews plainly of their sin in crucifying Christ--but uses persuasives and gospel promises to allure and encourage them to believe. Acts 2:23, "Him you have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified"; verse 38, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sin: for the promise is to you and to your children." Reproof is a bitter pill, and hard to swallow; therefore, we must dip it in sugar! Use those sweet mollifying expressions that others may see love coming along with the reproof. David compares reproof to oil, Psalm 141:5. Oil supplies the joints when they are hard and stiff. Our reproofs, being mixed with the oil of compassion, work most kindly and most soften stiff, obdurate hearts!

Reproving sin--yet loving the person, is when the end of our reproof is not to revile him--but to reclaim him. While we go to heal men's consciences, we must take heed of wounding their names. The surgeon, in opening a vein, shows both skill and love: skill in cutting an artery, and love in letting out the bad blood. Here is the mixing of the serpent and the dove. The wisdom of the serpent is seen in not reproaching the sinner; the innocence of the dove is seen in reclaiming him from sin.

4. Prudence and holiness is seen in this: to know what we should do, and do what we know. To know what we should do is the wisdom of the serpent; to do what we know is the innocence of the dove, John 13:17.

Knowledge is a jewel which adorns him who wears it; it is the enriching and bespangling of the mind. Knowledge is the eye of the soul to guide it in the right way--but this knowledge must be joined with holy practice. To separate practice from knowledge--is to separate the dove from the serpent. Many illuminated heads can discourse fluently in matters of religion--but they do not live up to their knowledge. This is to have good eyes--but to have the feet cut off! They know they should not defame nor defraud; but they do not practice what they know. Here they separate the dove from the serpent, virtue from knowledge. How vain is knowledge without practice! As if one should know a sovereign medicine--but not apply it. Satan is a knowing spirit; he has enough of the serpent. But that which makes him a devil, is that he lacks the dove! He does not practice holiness.

5. To mix the serpent and dove is to keep two trades going.

To understand worldly affairs is the wisdom of the serpent; yet to not neglect the soul is the innocence of the dove. God has said, "Six days shall you labor," Exodus 20:9. Religion never granted a patent to idleness. There is a lawful care to be had about secular things. To have knowledge in one's vocation, is a commendable wisdom--but, with this wisdom, join the dove's innocence--follow your vocation, as not to neglect your soul. The soul is a precious thing; it would beggar the angels, to give half the price of a soul. Our greatest care should be to get grace. While you put gold in your bag--do not forget to put oil in your vessel. Trade beyond the East Indies; drive a trade of holiness. "For she is more profitable than silver, and her revenue is better than gold. She is more precious than jewels; nothing you desire compares with her!" Proverbs 3:14, 15. Live in a vocation--but especially live by faith. Look to providing for your families--but especially to the saving of your souls.

The soul is the angelic part; the loss of the soul can never be made up. God has given a man two eyes. If he loses one, he has another; but he has but one soul. If he loses that, it is irrecoverable! It can never be made up again. Oh, unite the serpent and the dove, prudence and holiness! Use the world--but love your soul; trade on earth--but beware of failing in your trade for heaven. How many part these two, the serpent and the dove? They are wise for the world--but fools for their souls! It is too often seen that men pull down their souls--to build up a worldly estate.

6. To join the serpent and the dove, prudence and innocence, consists in this: to know how to give counsel--and how to keep counsel. He has the wisdom of the serpent who can give counsel. He knows how to advise another in difficult cases, and speak a word in due season. 2 Samuel 16:23, "Every word Ahithophel spoke, seemed as wise as though it had come directly from the mouth of God."

But this is not enough to have the wisdom of the serpent in being able to give counsel. There must be the innocence of the dove, too, in keeping counsel. If a friend's secret is imparted to us, unless in case of harm, we are not to reveal it. A friend is as one's own soul, Deuteronomy 13:6; and what he imparts of his heart, should be kept under lock and key, Proverbs 25:9-10, "Do not betray another man's confidence." To disclose a friend's secret, though it is not treason, is treachery. It is most unchristian; a word may be spoken in secret, which, when it is trumpeted out, may occasion quarrels or law-suits. He who cannot keep a matter committed to him, is like a vessel which leaks out, or a sick stomach which cannot keep the food--but vomits it up again. He who publishes his friend's secret, publishes his own shame.

7. To mix these two, prudence and holiness, is to know the seasons of grace--and improve them. To know the seasons of grace is the wisdom of the serpent. It is wisdom in the farmer to know the fit time for pruning of trees, and sowing of seed. Just so, it is no less wisdom to know the golden seasons of grace.

While we hear the joyful sound, while we have praying hours, while the Spirit of God blows on our hearts--here is a gale for heaven. The day of grace will not always last; the shadows of the evening seem to be stretched out. Things look as if the gospel is tending towards a decline. Be wise as serpents--know what a treasure is put in your hands. And with the serpent, join the dove--that is, in improving the seasons of grace. Doves not only know their season but improve it. They fly to the warmer climate in the spring. Here is the serpent and dove united, knowing and improving the day of grace. When we profit by ordinances, when we mix the word with faith, when an ordinance has stamped holiness upon us, as the seal leaves its print upon the wax. This is to improve the seasons of grace.

8. The serpent and the dove, wisdom and innocence, is to be moderate--yet zealous. Moderation is good in some cases. Philippians 4:5, "Let your moderation be known to all." Moderation is good in case of anger. When the passions are up, moderation sits as queen and governess in the soul. It allays the heat of passion. Moderation is the bridle of anger.

Moderation is good in case of lawsuits. If there is a dispute in law between us and others, we are not to take the extremity of the law, but use Christian equity and mildness. Nay, for peace's sake rather part with some of our rights--than oppress others. This much honors the gospel.

Moderation is good in things indifferent. Moderation and Christian forbearance in things indifferent would much tend to the peace and unity of the church. All this moderation is commendable and shows the wisdom of the serpent; but remember to join the dove with the serpent. We must so exercise moderation, as still to nourish zeal. Paul, in some things, was moderate. Acts 15:25. He was sensitive of laying a yoke upon the consciences of the disciples; but he had zeal with his moderation. When he saw their idolatry at Athens, the fire of his zeal broke forth. Acts 17:16, "He was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols!" To be cool and silent when God's blessed truths are undermined or adulterated, is not moderation but lukewarmness, which is to God a most hateful temper. Revelation 3:15, "I would you were cold or hot", anything but lukewarm. This is to show prudence and holiness, when we are moderate yet zealous.

9. To unite serpent and dove consists in this: when we defend the truth by argument and adorn it by life. Defending the truth is the serpent's wisdom. An intelligent Christian can convince gainsayers. This wisdom of the serpent was eminent in Stephen. Acts 6:9-10: "None of them was able to stand against the wisdom and Spirit by which Stephen spoke." We read of John Fryth, martyr, being opposed by three papists. He, like another Hercules, fighting with all the three at once, by his wisdom so convinced them that one of them turned from popery and became a zealous Christian. Herein is the wisdom of the serpent: not only to love those who profess the truth--but to silence those who oppose it.

But with this wisdom of the serpent--there must be joined the innocence of the dove. Together with defending the truth by argument, there must be adorning it by life. Titus 2:10, "That they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior." There are some who can dispute for the truth--but disgrace it by their bad living. This is to act both the serpent and the dove, when we not only plead for the truth but walk in the truth, like Nazianzen, of whom it was said he had thunder in his doctrine--and lightning in his life.

10. The uniting the serpent and the dove is to be serious in religion--yet cheerful. Seriousness puts the heart in a holy frame; it fixes it on God. Seriousness is to the soul as ballast to the ship: it keeps the soul from being overturned with vanity. The heart is ever best when it is serious--but this seriousness in religion must be mixed with cheerfulness. Cheerfulness conduces to health, Proverbs 17:22. It honors religion; it

proclaims to the world that we serve a good Master. Cheerfulness is a friend to grace; it puts the heart in tune to praise God, Psalm 71:21. Uncheerful Christians, like the spies--bring an evil report on the good land. Others suspect there is something unpleasant in religion, when those who profess it hang their harps upon the willows, and walk so dejectedly. Be serious--yet cheerful. Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always." Why was Christ anointed, but to give "a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair!" Isaiah 61:3. Joy is as much a fruit of the Spirit, as faith, Galatians 5:22. One way of grieving the Spirit, is by an uncheerful walking. If you would render the gospel lovely, mix the dove and the serpent; be serious yet cheerful in God.

11. The uniting of the serpent and the dove, wisdom and holiness, consists in this: when we so lay up--as we lay out. It is a duty to provide for our family. 1 Timothy 5:8, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." To lay up for our family is the wisdom of the serpent; but we must lay out for the poor too--here is the mixture of the dove. 1 Timothy 6:17,18, "Charge those who are rich in the world, that they do good, that they be rich in good works." The poor man is, as it were, an altar. If we bring our alms and lay upon it, with such sacrifices God is well-pleased. Faith, though it sometimes has a trembling hand--must not have a withered hand--but must stretch forth itself to works of mercy. There's nothing lost by charitableness. Proverbs 11:25, "The liberal soul shall be made fat." Psalm 41:1, "Oh, the joys of those who are kind to the poor. The Lord rescues them in times of trouble." While men so remember their family--that they do not forget the poor--they show both prudence and piety; they unite the serpent and the dove.

12. The serpent's wisdom and the dove's innocence is seen in this: so to avoid danger--as not to commit sin; to preserve our liberty--yet keep our integrity. There is a sinful escaping danger, namely, when we are called to suffer for the truth and we decline it. And there is an escaping danger, without sin. For example, when we do not betray ourselves into the enemies hands by rashness, nor yet betray the truth by cowardice. We have a pattern of this in our Savior. He avoided His enemies in one place that He might preach the gospel in another place. Luke 4:29-30, "They led Him unto the brow of the hill, that they might cast Him down headlong; but He passing through the midst of them, went His way." There was Christ's wisdom in not betraying Himself to His enemy; and verse 43, "I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also." There was His holiness. Christ's securing Himself, was in order to preach of the gospel. This is to mix prudence and innocence, when we so avoid danger--yet do not commit sin.

Thus I have, as briefly and as clearly as I could, shown you how we must unite these two, the serpent and the dove, prudence and holiness. For lack of coupling these two together, true religion suffers much in the Christian world. "What Christ has joined together, let no man put asunder." Observe these two: prudence and holiness. Here is the serpent's eye in the dove's head. When these two, wisdom and innocence appear together, they are a preview of much good and happiness, which will befall a Christian.

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