

[R745]

WISE AS SERPENTS, AND HARMLESS AS DOVES.

"Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." [Matt. 10:16](#).

Thus spoke our Lord when he first commissioned his apostles to preach the gospel. They were going out to save men from death. Their operations would be among all class and characters. They themselves would be exposed to persecution and death. They would have to meet prejudice and bitter opposition. Unbelief and hardness of heart would hinder them at every step. They had a most important mission to accomplish. It was important that their object should be gained. They must succeed. Christ gave them this general rule by which to govern their conduct, as best calculated to secure the object they had in view. Human nature is much the same in all ages, and the plan of God is mainly the same. This rule is doubtless just as good now as it was eighteen hundred years ago.

Why does our Saviour take the serpent as an example of wisdom for them to pattern after? There must be some reason for this. He does not want those who go out to catch souls to imitate the serpent except in the matter of its wisdom. But in that respect he does. The habits of the serpent are peculiar, and contain a lesson of instruction. Why does not the Saviour tell his servants to be wise as lions, wolves, or other ferocious beasts? Why select a serpent?

Anyone who has given the matter any reflection can readily answer. The serpent does not, in approaching his victim, rush out in a manner to frighten, intimidate, and repulse, like those creatures. His approaches are very cautious, and yet effectual. He glides along in the most careful manner possible, so as not to needlessly alarm, and presents himself in a manner to favorably affect the one whom he is seeking to reach. If necessary, he can wait long and patiently, while the victim runs or flies hither and thither, still holding himself in that position which will most favorably influence. The victim, thus drawn toward him, comes within reach, and is taken. When the serpent strikes home to secure his prey, there is very rarely a failure in accomplishing his object. In all this there seems to be a wisdom peculiar to that creature. When the cat or other destructive animal lies in wait for its prey, it usually conceals itself until it gives the spring which destroys its victim. But the serpent often presents itself fully to view, and, by the attractions which it presents, secures its object.

Our Saviour instructs his followers to imitate the wisdom of the serpent, while they are harmless as doves. They do not catch souls to destroy, but to save. If they desire to accomplish this good object, they should use wisdom. The object is the highest and noblest that can engage the attention of men. Therefore the highest wisdom should be employed to accomplish it.

The human mind is difficult to manage. How necessary that all who try to present God's truth before it, either as ministers, or distributors of tracts, or in common conversation, should understand their business. It is very easy in ten minutes' conversation to leave impressions upon minds which it will be nearly impossible to efface. Much injury has been done to the cause of truth in the past by individuals in various communities being ever ready to "pitch in," as the common expression has it, and argue and debate, on street corners or in stores, or wherever there was a chance to crowd in the truth, whether people wanted to hear it or not, until people

became disgusted, and perhaps their ears could never again be reached. This is not the wisdom of the serpent. It has no resemblance to it.

Neither do such follow the directions of Peter. They may quote a portion of his direction, but they forget or ignore the remainder. "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear." The class above referred to rarely wait to give any one a chance to ask them the reason of their hope, but press them upon people against their wishes, and they entirely forget the "meekness and fear." Such only do harm.

This great principle of the Saviour and his apostle should be remembered by all who engage in the distribution of tracts and papers.

A spirit boasting, or glorying over others, because our views of Scripture are more consistent than theirs, will always drive them away. We may use the truth as a club to show our great strength in the argument, but it will not bring men to God. And, as a general rule, unless there be a disposition to listen and consider the truth, and hear what is said, talk concerning it will not accomplish very much.

What we want is a spirit of meekness and Christian love, which, being real and genuine, and heart-felt, will manifest itself to the one listening, and show him that our motive is to do him good, not to gain a personal victory over him. When a person can be persuaded that is our real motive, it will have its influence.

We must not undertake to force religion or truth down people's throats. Were it possible to succeed in so doing, it would amount to nothing really in the sight of God. He wants the *willing* service alone. When we have that spirit of love spoken of above, it will give us the very disposition spoken of by our Saviour, at the head of this article. For the "wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without wrangling [see the margin] and without hypocrisy." It is a wisdom that comes from another source which makes men love contention and personal triumph, and leads men to crowd upon people that which they will not hear if they can help it. It is "earthly wisdom," which grows out of selfishness.

—G. I. Butler.