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Matthew 10:16—Emulating Serpents and Doves

Jesus says to his disciples, “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16).

Basic Meaning

The verse contains three similes and a metaphor:

- Jesus’s disciples will be like sheep (because they will be vulnerable)
- The people among whom they go will be wolves (prone to take advantage of them and do them harm)
- they should therefore be like serpents (wise)
- but they should also be like doves (innocent).

It is obvious why sheep are vulnerable and wolves are prone to harm the vulnerable.

Serpents may serve as a simile for wisdom, because in Jewish tradition the serpent was the wisest of all creatures in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1).

And doves may stand for innocence because they had been a symbol of peace ever since a dove signaled to Noah that God’s urge to destroy humanity had abated (Gen. 8:8–11).

Augustine's Interpretation

Not content with the basic interpretation above, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) searched for attributes of serpents and doves worth emulating. The doves were relatively easy: “Mark how doves rejoice in society; they fly and feed together always; they do not love to be alone; they delight in communion; they preserve affection; their cooings are the plaintive cries of love; with kissings they beget their young.” (*Sermons* 14.4)

The serpents, by Augustine's own admission, were a bit more difficult. He initially questions, “What hath the wisdom of the serpent to do in the simplicity of the dove?” Ultimately, he determines the snake's laying “aside his old coat of skin, that he may spring forth into new life” worthy of imitation just as the apostle Paul said, “put away your former way of life, your old self” (Eph. 4:22). The snake's tendency to protect its head as its source of life, Augustine observes, is also worthy of imitation because Christians must remain connected to Christ as their head and source of life. He concludes, “Whoso then keepeth Christ in him, keepeth his head for his protection” (*Sermons* 14.3)¹.

1. P. Schaaf et al., eds., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, 14 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1887–94), 6:14.