

Wise Doves

Jeremiah 14:10-18; Mt 10:16-25; Jude 3-13



We are familiar with the gospel's demands of love, mercy, and gentleness. We are comfortable with these standards, even if we do not always live up to them. Perhaps less recognized are Jesus' demands for believers to be discerning, wise, and discerning. How do love and grace cooperate with the need to discern between truth and error, honesty and deceit, substance and appearance?

Jeremiah spoke a message the people did not wish to hear. They longed for the comforting words of *Yahweh* vindicating them from their enemies, protecting them from destruction, and restoring their prosperity. They wanted to hear of grace, mercy, and blessing without the demands of faithfulness, commitment, and service. They were missing the elements of their accountability as the nation of *Yahweh*. Their service had become mere lip service, without the sincerity that *Yahweh* expected of the people.

They claimed to be the people of *Yahweh*, but they served themselves instead. Many of the prophets of the day simply proclaimed what the people wanted to hear. They had taken the name of *Yahweh* as their God, but they had taken *Yahweh* in name only. It was time for them to learn to trust *Yahweh* and follow in truth. *Yahweh's* words seem harsh, for at first glance it would appear that the problem lay with the false prophets. Surely, blame belonged to the lying prophets who spoke falsely in the name of *Yahweh* that which had not come from God. Surely, they were the ones who should be charged with dealing falsely with *Yahweh* and taking God's name in vain.

The false prophets were not excused for their lies, but *Yahweh* did not hold them accountable alone. *Yahweh's* word to Jeremiah extended condemnation to the people who followed the lying prophets simply because they wanted to believe the lie. *Yahweh* dealt with the nation as though the people themselves knew the voice of *Yahweh* and could discern between the true prophet and the false one. The lying prophets were not excused, but neither did they carry the blame by themselves. The people were to be held accountable to *Yahweh's* word, regardless of the actions and responsibility of the false prophets in their midst.

God would not allow the nation to refuse their responsibility to weigh the messages they heard against what they knew of *Yahweh*. If they chose to listen to false words, they would bear the responsibility for their decision. The people were accountable for those they would choose to follow. *Yahweh* would not allow them to shirk their responsibility to discern truth from error. If they would listen to false prophets, they would bear the burden themselves.

Jesus was aware of false teachers in his day, as well as enemies of the gospel who were yet to arise. As he sent the twelve out on their missionary experience of trusting God, he warned them of confrontation they would face. These words recorded here are not just about the mission of the twelve. We have a message here as well about persecution that would arise after Jesus' death and resurrection, as well. He warned believers that they were being sent out into the midst of those who would oppose their words, presence, and ministry efforts. He warned them that they would eventually be dragged before hostile authorities and would face persecution. He told them to keep their eyes open, aware of the danger and those who would oppose them. They were to be wary.

While Jesus enjoined believers to be wary and discerning of hostility against them, they were also to maintain their innocence in the midst of all opposition. Wise as serpents (the ancient symbol of wisdom as the owl in European lore), they were to recognize those who would oppose the gospel. They were not expected to pretend there was no opposition to the gospel. Opposition to the gospel's demands was a given. While believers were charged to be wary, they were also to remain innocent as doves. They were to allow God to be the one to intervene for their welfare, returning good for evil. Jesus did not call them to be cowed and silent in the face of opposition. They were to remain innocent, even as they stood firm for the good news.

As Jeremiah had modeled centuries before, they were to take a clear stance in opposition to those who did not speak in accordance with the will of *Yahweh*, while allowing God to protect them or not from their enemies. They were to speak in defense of the gospel of grace, allowing the Breath of the Holy One to speak through them. While innocent, they were to clarify the word of *Yahweh* before others. Jesus warned them of betrayal to come. Jesus warned them of opposition. Jesus warned them of persecution. The gospel makes enemies, even if it is good news for those who would be saved. Jesus called believers to be faithful and true in the midst of opposition. Those who would follow Jesus as Lord must accept the cost of discipleship, even as Jesus accepted it.

Jude recognized opposition to the gospel. He wrote of the need for believers to "contend for the faith" as a trust worthy of protecting. He warned the saints that opposition came not only from those who obviously stood outside the walls of Christian faith. Opposition also came from others who considered themselves to be within the bounds of Christian faith. Jude speaks specifically of those who depended so strongly on grace that they discarded the concept of sin and indulged gross immorality. His instruction, however, goes beyond the limits of this one abuse and misuse of the gospel of grace. Jude charges believers to discern between the gospel in its integrity and distortion of the message of salvation.

Jude charges these who oppose the gospel as empty and worthless. He is not so much concerned that they have gotten parts of the gospel wrong, but that they have violated the essential message of salvation's purpose. They claimed ownership of the gospel and salvation, but they had never come to understand salvation's demands on their lives. They had never submitted their lives to the lordship of Christ, but strove to force God to grant them absolution from responsibility. They claimed wisdom, but they had become fools. They had missed the gospel's purpose to redeem them from their own sinfulness and introduce them to service before God.

It is not comfortable to accept the responsibility demands of the gospel upon our lives. If we are to judge what we hear, weigh the words of others against the Word of God we have before us, and discern among the cacophony of truth claims around us, we have a great responsibility. Jesus' words, however, are that we be wise as serpents and remain innocent as doves. The responsibility to weigh what we hear falls upon us, and we are responsible to determine what voice we shall hear and follow.

It is easier to shirk that responsibility and cast those decisions on the shoulders of others. Many have opted to do just that. Eternity weighs in the balance. Is it worth the risk to allow another to decide for us? We are called to responsibility, discernment, and innocence. Baptists called it "soul competency." We are accountable for ourselves. How shall we proceed?

