impact International Journals and Publications

© IIJP 2026 | Volume 2, Issue 3, pp. 976-984 | ISSN: 2636-4484

SHEEP AMONG WOLVES: THE DILEMMA OF CHRISTIAN LIFE IN MATTHEW 10:16

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ARTICLE INFO
Article No.: 0488
Accepted Date: 19/07/2026
Published Date: 20/08/2026
Type: Research

ABSTRACT
Matthew 10:16 stands at the heart of Jesus' Mission Discourse in Matthew 10:5-42, where he prepared his disciples for the realities of proclaiming the Kingdom of God in a hostile environment. Instead of promising them comfort or safety, he warned his followers that faithful discipleship would expose them to opposition, rejection, and persecution. Yet he also provided the ethical and spiritual qualities necessary for fulfilling their mission faithfully: serpent-like wisdom and dove-like innocence. The researcher used a historical-grammatical method of exegesis to examine the historical context of the Matthean community, offers a detailed exegetical analysis of the Greek text and its key metaphors, and explored the contemporary relevance of Jesus' instruction for Christians navigating ideological opposition in modern politics, education, business, social media, and secular culture. The researcher argued that authentic Christian witness requires both theological discernment and Christlike character, resisting the twin dangers of compromising biblical truth for social acceptance or defending truth with hostility and self-righteousness. Therefore, he recommended that Christians to resist the temptation to compromise biblical truth for social acceptance, political convenience, or professional advancement.

Keywords: Discipleship, Persecution, Wisdom, Innocence, Mission

Introduction

Matthew 10:16 stands among the most paradoxical statements in the New Testament. It captures the essential dilemma of Christian life and mission: vulnerability in a hostile world, yet divine equipping through wisdom and innocence. As N.T. Wright observes that "Matthew's Gospel consistently portrays discipleship as a tension between suffering and mission" (122). Indeed, this verse functions not merely as metaphor but as a programmatic summary of the entire Christian life.

The Mission Discourse (Matt. 10:5-42) records Jesus preparing the Twelve for their apostolic mission. Unlike Luke's account of the seventy (Luke 10), Matthew focuses specifically on the inner circle of disciples, emphasizing the gravity of their commission. Jesus does not promise comfort or safety; rather, he warns that faithful witness inevitably provokes opposition (Hagner 283).

Theologically, Matthew 10:16 presents a profound paradox. Jesus neither advocates passive victimhood nor aggressive retaliation. Instead, he commands a discipleship characterized by courageous engagement, practical wisdom, unwavering integrity, and complete dependence upon God. This balance reflects Jesus himself, who consistently displayed extraordinary wisdom before his opponents while remaining entirely sinless in his conduct (1 Pet. 2:22-23).

Historical Context of Matthew 10:5-42

Matthew's Mission Discourse reflects the lived experience of the Matthean community, a predominantly Jewish-Christian congregation navigating exclusion from synagogues and suspicion from Roman authorities. Abraham Mutholath noted that Jesus prepared his disciples for rejection in synagogues and trials before governors, reflecting the actual social location of Matthew's audience (bibleinterpretation.org/matthew-10_16-25). Which the disciples actually encountered the oppositions initially from the Jewish authorities and later from Roman Empire officials. Hence, Prince E. Peters argues that Matthew 10:16-23 reflects "intra-Jewish persecution, later extending to Roman hostility" (5845). More so, Donald A. Hagner emphasizes that disciples and followers of Jesus "faced exclusion from synagogues and suspicion from Roman authorities" (283). Thus, the metaphor of sheep among wolves is historically grounded in concrete experiences of persecution.

Persecution refers to suffering imposed on persons or groups because of their religious convictions – represents a common theme throughout the Bible (Freedman 1030). During the Intertestamental period, intense suffering inflicted by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, including the Maccabean martyrdoms vividly described in 2 Maccabees 6-7, challenged Jews to remain faithful (Freedman 1030). The New Testament further documents persecution of Christians in the first century A.D. by Jewish communities, pagan neighbors, and Roman imperial officials.

Jewish Communities: The New Testament explicitly records that Jews suffered because of their fidelity to their ancestral religion (Heb. 11:35-38), while Christians were persecuted by Jews and suffered under Roman officials. At the inception of Christianity, Jewish Christians were regarded as sectarians (minim) within Judaism, though eventually many Christians understood themselves as distinct from the Jewish community. Tensions escalated particularly around A.D. 39/40, when the Christian attitude toward the temple likely prevented them from opposing Caligula's attempt to desecrate it (Evans 775-776).

Theological disagreement intensified the conflict. Christians proclaimed Jesus as God, the Son of God, and the promised Messiah of the Old Testament, whereas Jewish opponents viewed him merely as the son of Joseph the carpenter and his wife Mary (Matt. 13:55-56). Consequently, many Jews considered Christianity idolatry and blasphemy against YHWH and

the Jewish faith. Additionally, Matthew 17:24-27, particularly verse 26, asserts that 'the sons are free of temple taxation.' This teaching prompted persecution, as Jews interpreted it as an act of disobedience and a refusal to support the temple. Most Jewish Christians of this period suffered at the hands of their fellow Jews, or their fellow Jews handed them over to Roman authorities for punishment.

Pagan Communities: Gentile Christians also faced persecution from pagan communities. Gentile believers refused to worship ancestral gods and participate in pagan cults, which became a primary reason for persecution among their kindred (Hastings 19). This pattern frequently emerged when churches were planted in heathen communities, where those first to accept the Christian faith suffered rejection and violence from their own relatives and neighbors.

Roman Empire Officials: The Roman Empire persecuted Christians throughout the first century A.D. and beyond for various reasons, under different emperors, and through diverse methods. Romans generally respected Jews as an ancient people who had remained faithful to their ancestral traditions. By contrast, they viewed Christians with stronger dislike because Christians had abandoned their ancestral religions to become followers of a crucified man (Evans 776). Several factors motivated imperial persecution: Christians' refusal to worship Roman gods and emperors; the classification of Christianity as an illegal religion *(religio illicita);* the perception of Christianity as a political threat to the *Pax Romana*; and the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64 during Emperor Nero's reign, which Nero blamed on Christians (Evans 776).

Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 10:16

Greek Text and Translation

Ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ ἀποστέλλω ὑμᾶς ὡς πρόβατα ἐν μέσῳ λύκων· γίνεσθε οὖν φρόνιμοι ὡς οἱ ὄφεις καὶ ἀκέραιοι ὡς αἱ περιστεραί. (Nestle-Aland).

Literal Translation: Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore, become wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Literary and Immediate Context: Matthew 10:16 occupies a pivotal position within the Mission Discourse (10:5-42). Having granted the Twelve authority over unclean spirits and diseases (10:1), Jesus now delineates the conditions under which they will exercise this authority. The verse functions as a transition between the positive announcement of the kingdom and the sobering realities of missionary existence. It is programmatic not merely for the immediate mission of the Twelve but for all subsequent Christian witness, as the concluding verses of the discourse extend Jesus' instructions to disciples beyond the apostolic generation (10:40-42).

Syntactical and Lexical Analysis: The verse opens with the aorist imperative Ἰδοὺ ("Behold"), a deictic particle that demands attention and signals the weight of what follows. Its placement at the discourse's turning point underscores the gravity of Jesus' warning. The emphatic ἐγὼ ("I") immediately follows, highlighting the personal agency of the sender. The present active indicative ἀποστέλλω ("I am sending") denotes not a future commissioning but an immediate, ongoing action rooted in Jesus' own authority. The disciples do not initiate this mission; they participate in a divine initiative that originates in Christ himself.

The prepositional phrase ἐν μέσῳ ("in the midst of") carries significant theological weight because Jesus does not send his disciples merely near the wolves but into the very center of hostile territory. This preposition emphasizes active engagement rather than strategic withdrawal. Christian mission, therefore, does not occur in protected enclaves but within the hostile world itself. Wright correctly observes that "Matthew consistently presents discipleship as faithful participation in God's mission despite suffering and rejection" (122).

The imperative γίνεσθε, a present middle imperative, commands continuous action: "keep becoming" or "continue to be." The present tense indicates that wisdom and innocence are not sporadic virtues but habitual characteristics cultivated throughout the entirety of Christian discipleship or life. The inferential particle οὖν ("therefore") logically connects the command to the preceding condition: because the disciples stand among wolves, they must simultaneously embody wisdom and innocence.

The adjective φρόνιμοι ("wise," "prudent," "shrewd") derives from φρήν, referring to practical intelligence and careful judgment. In biblical usage, this term denotes not worldly cunning or manipulative cleverness but strategic discernment that enables believers to navigate hostile situations without compromising their testimony. Grant R. Osborne notes that Jesus calls for precisely this kind of "strategic discernment" (387). Such wisdom encompasses knowing when to speak, when to remain silent, and how to proclaim the gospel effectively across diverse cultural settings.

Balancing wisdom is the command to be ἀκέραιοι ὡς αἱ περιστεραί ("innocent as doves"). The adjective ἀκέραιος literally means "unmixed," "pure," or "without corruption." Paul employs cognate terminology when urging believers to become "blameless and innocent" in Philippians 2:15. Hagner explains that "Christian innocence signifies moral integrity that remains uncontaminated even amid persecution" (284). The combination of these two commands creates a dialectical tension that prevents either virtue from degenerating into vice.

The Metaphors: The four metaphors from the text have been explained as follows:

Sheep: The noun πρόβατα refers to domesticated sheep, animals characterized by dependence, helplessness, and complete reliance upon the shepherd. In the Old Testament, Hebrew terms such as rahel (Isa. 53:7) and seh (Jer. 50:17) employ ovine imagery to describe God's covenant people and the messianic Suffering Servant. Sheep constitute the most frequently mentioned animal in Scripture, with nearly four hundred references, while the shepherd figure receives approximately one hundred mentions. This prevalence reflects both the agricultural importance of sheep in ancient Israel and their aptness as metaphors for spiritual dependence (Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 782-83).

In Matthew 10:16, the metaphor underscores the disciples' vulnerability. Jesus deliberately chooses this imagery to highlight that missionary success does not depend on human strength or ingenuity but on humble dependence upon divine guidance. Osborne observes that "Jesus deliberately chose this imagery to highlight vulnerability in mission" (387). Craig S. Keener adds that "sheep were common sacrificial animals, reinforcing the theme of discipleship as costly witness" (325). The metaphor thus demands humility and trust in Christ, the Good Shepherd, rather than reliance on worldly power.

Wolves: Conversely, λύκοι ("wolves") symbolize violent enemies and destructive opponents. Throughout Scripture, wolves represent both external persecutors and internal threats from false teachers. Keener explains that "wolves were proverbial symbols of greed, violence, and hostility in both Jewish and Greco-Roman literature, making Jesus' metaphor immediately understandable to his audience" (325). Acts 20:29 warns of "savage wolves" threatening the flock, imagery early Christian leaders applied to both Roman persecutors and heretical teachers within the church. The metaphor remains urgently relevant as contemporary Christians face ideological and cultural opposition that mirrors the hostility of ancient wolves.

Wise as Serpents: The comparison ὡς οἱ ὄφεις ("as serpents") requires careful theological qualification because it is not for disciples to imitate all characters of serpent but its shrewdness. Although Genesis 3 associates the serpent with Satan, ancient Near Eastern culture also regarded

serpents as symbols of caution, alertness, and survival. Jesus appropriates this positive cultural image of prudence while explicitly rejecting deceit character of serpent. John Chrysostom interprets the serpent's wisdom not as an endorsement of evil but as an example of "prudence and self-preservation" (215). Chrysostom further describes this prudence as the "shield" of mission, balancing vulnerability with discernment (215).

That is why Wright suggests that Jesus' command calls for "missionary intelligence – the ability to discern cultural contexts without compromising the gospel" (114). This wisdom is not cunning for self-preservation but strategic discernment for faithful witness of the gospel. The serpent metaphor thus legitimizes cultural awareness and tactical thinking while maintaining ethical boundaries.

Innocent as Doves: The dove (περιστερά) symbolizes purity, gentleness, peace, and sincerity throughout biblical literature. Unlike the serpent, whose wisdom guards believers against unnecessary danger, the dove represents the moral character that prevents believers from adopting sinful methods in carrying out God's mission. Keener observes that "Jesus intentionally combines these two seemingly opposite qualities because wisdom without purity becomes manipulation, while innocence without discernment becomes naïveté" (326). This synthetic combination prevents the distortion of either virtue.

The Paradox: Wisdom and Innocence Together

The genius of Matthew 10:16 lies in its refusal to separate wisdom from innocence. Historical and contemporary Christian witness repeatedly demonstrates that isolating these virtues produces defective discipleship. Wisdom without innocence degenerates into cynical manipulation, political opportunism, or doctrinal compromise. Innocence without wisdom collapses into gullibility, cultural irrelevance, or unnecessary martyrdom. Jesus demands both virtues simultaneously, creating a dialectical balance that preserves the integrity of the mission.

Martin Luther understood this synthesis as essential to Christian existence in a hostile world. He argued that the wisdom of the serpent enables believers to avoid snares and unnecessary persecution, while the innocence of the dove restrains them from deceit and malice. Luther insisted that Christians must seek only God's glory, doing injury to no one (246). John Calvin similarly warned that wisdom without sincerity becomes craftiness, while innocence without wisdom becomes folly. Thus, true Christian prudence, Calvin maintained, must always be joined with sincerity (282). Indeed, if the two virtues are separated the Christian witness will not be effective. Therefore, combining the two as Jesus instructed is only the solution that brings effective witness in any hostile community.

This Reformation consensus aligns with the broader patristic tradition as Chrysostom described serpentine prudence as the "shield" of mission, protecting vulnerable disciples without arming them for aggression (215). In the modern context, Joe M. Kapolyo applies this balance to African Christianity, noting that mission requires both prudence and transparency. Armed with these qualities, believers avoid unnecessarily antagonizing opponents while ensuring that accusations against them remain false (1132). William MacDonald reinforces this by emphasizing that wisdom must never become compromise, and innocence must never become naivety (1268). Hence, balancing the two virtues is necessary.

The exegetical evidence thus converges on a single conclusion: Jesus commands not a naive idealism that ignores danger, nor a cynical realism that abandons ethics, but a third way – a discerning innocence that engages hostility without becoming hostile, that recognizes evil without participating in it, and that proclaims truth without resorting to the methods of falsehood.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

For contemporary Christians, Matthew 10:16 remains remarkably relevant. Believers frequently encounter ideological opposition across multiple domains of modern life. Jesus' instruction challenges them to resist two opposite dangers: compromising biblical truth for social acceptance, or defending truth with hostility and self-righteousness. Thus, authentic Christian witness requires both theological discernment and Christlike character.

In the political arena, Christians face pressure to dilute their convictions for partisan gain or to adopt the adversarial tactics of secular political culture. For example, in Nigeria and other pluralistic democracies, Christian politicians must navigate legislative debates on religious freedom, marriage law, and education policy. The serpent's wisdom demands that they understand constitutional frameworks, build strategic coalitions, and anticipate opposition arguments. The dove's innocence requires that they reject character assassination, voter manipulation, and the politics of ethnic or religious hatred. They must campaign and govern with integrity, even when doing so costs them popular support or political advancement.

In educational contexts, Christian students and faculty in secular universities often encounter ideological frameworks that contradict biblical anthropology and ethics. For instance, a biology professor who holds to a Christian view of human dignity should exercise serpentine wisdom in understanding contemporary scientific methodologies and in framing arguments that secular colleagues can engage intellectually. Simultaneously, the dove's innocence prevents him from misrepresenting data, sabotaging colleagues' research, or using underhanded means to advance creationist or pro-life positions in the academy. He should maintain academic honesty while refusing to capitulate to materialist assumptions that reduce human persons to mere biological mechanisms.

In the business world, Christian entrepreneurs and professionals regularly confront ethical dilemmas that pit biblical honesty against market pressures. Consider a Christian contractor bidding for government infrastructure projects in contexts where bribery and kickbacks represent standard practice. Serpentine wisdom involves understanding procurement laws, building transparent accounting systems, and anticipating the opposition of corrupt competitors who may retaliate against an honest bidder. The dove's innocence refuses the bribe, the false invoice, and the under-the-table deal, even when such refusal means losing contracts that would sustain employees and families. This witness transforms the marketplace not through hostile condemnation but through the quiet power of ethical consistency.

Social media presents perhaps the most immediate contemporary application of Matthew 10:16. Christian influencers, pastors, and ordinary believers navigate digital environments characterized by algorithmic outrage, cancel culture, and ideological polarization. Serpentine wisdom requires understanding how platform algorithms amplify controversy, recognizing both networks and coordinated disinformation campaigns, and discerning when engagement fuels conflict rather than persuasion. The dove's innocence manifests in refusing to spread unverified rumors, to demonize ideological opponents, or to cultivate online personas that perform Christianity for likes and retweets rather than embodying it in real relationships. When a Christian refuses to retweet a defamatory story about a political opponent, or when a pastor declines to monetize controversy through sensational content, they embody the synthesis of wisdom and innocence that Jesus commands.

In broader secular culture, Christians face what Charles Taylor calls the "immanent frame" – a social imaginary that treats religious belief as a private preference rather than a public truth claim (542). The serpent's wisdom enables believers to recognize the unexamined naturalist assumptions embedded in entertainment, journalism, and public policy. The dove's innocence

prevents them from responding with a siege mentality that withdraws from culture entirely or from a crusading spirit that seeks coercive political domination. Instead, they engage as sheep among wolves: vulnerable in their refusal to dominate, yet wise in their cultural analysis, and innocent in their refusal to adopt the methods of their opponents.

Peters highlights that "persecution defined the early church's struggle" (5845). Wright argues that "discipleship is inherently paradoxical: the kingdom advances through weakness, not force" (114). Contemporary Christians face similar challenges in workplaces, politics, and social media. The call remains to remain faithful without compromising integrity, embodying both serpent-like wisdom and dove-like innocence.

Matthew 10:16 portrays Christian discipleship as life lived in faithful tension. The disciple is vulnerable like a sheep, discerning like a serpent, and pure like a dove. Such balanced discipleship enables believers to proclaim the gospel effectively without sacrificing either truth or holiness. As Keener notes that "this paradoxical ethic equips Christians to navigate hostile environments without losing credibility" (325). In contemporary contexts, this means engaging culture critically yet lovingly, speaking truth without cruelty, and maintaining hope without naivety.

Conclusion

Matthew 10:16 functions simultaneously as sober warning and divine commission. Jesus does not send his disciples into a safe world; he sends them as sheep into the midst of wolves. Yet this vulnerability is not a divine oversight but a strategic deployment. The same Jesus who commands the mission also supplies the virtues necessary to sustain it: the shrewd discernment of serpents and the uncompromised purity of doves. This paradox defines authentic Christian witness. Strength manifests not in domination but in resilient vulnerability; purity persists not in isolation but in hostile environments; hope endures not through naivety but through Spirit-empowered discernment. The disciple who embodies both wisdom and innocence reflects Christ himself, who answered his accusers with irrefutable wisdom while remaining entirely without sin. The present imperative γίνεσθε ("keep being") reminds every generation of believers that these virtues require cultivation. Wisdom and innocence are not innate talents but Spirit-formed habits developed through Scripture, prayer, community, and the costly experience of mission itself. As the church continues its apostolic task amid twenty-first-century wolves, Matthew 10:16 remains its charter: sent by Christ, vulnerable in the world, yet equipped with everything necessary for faithful witness.

Recommendations

Based on the exegesis and contemporary relevance of Matthew 10:16, the following recommendations are offered for Christians, church leaders, and theological educators:

i. Christians should develop the ability to know when to speak and when to remain silent emulating the shrewdness of serpents. Theological institutions should integrate courses on cultural exegesis and apologetics that equip students to navigate hostile environments without compromising their testimony based on the two virtues (serpent's shrewdness and dove's gentleness).

ii. Christians should resist the temptation to compromise biblical truth for social acceptance, political convenience, or professional advancement, which in doing so the two virtues (serpent's shrewdness and dove's gentleness) must be maintained. Church leaders should foster communities where moral accountability is practiced, and where members are encouraged to remain "blameless and innocent" (Phil. 2:15) even when facing scrutiny or persecution in the midst of wolves.

iii. Christians should cultivate spiritual resilience through prayer, fellowship, and the disciplined study of God's Word because the present imperative γίνεσθε ("keep being") suggests that wisdom and innocence are not occasional virtues but lifelong characteristics. Churches should prioritize discipleship programs that prepare members for inevitable opposition in a pluralistic world, so that the two virtues (serpent's shrewdness and dove's gentleness) will be daily applied in their dealings.

iv. Believers are called to embody peace and love even in divisive contexts. The dove-like quality of innocence should be visible in interpersonal relationships, online engagement, and public discourse. Christians should reject manipulative or hostile methods of advocacy, choosing instead to reflect Christlike character that commends the gospel to a watching world.

v. Following the serpent's positive cultural image of caution and alertness, Christians should engage their communities strategically. This includes understanding the legal, social, and political landscapes in which they operate, anticipating opposition, and preparing responses that are both wise and gracious. Missionary intelligence – the ability to discern cultural contexts without compromising the gospel – should be a hallmark of Christian witness.

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