Section 2 - The Instructions

Matthew 10; Mark 6:7-13, 30-32; Luke 9:1-11

Jesus' instructions to the Twelve before He sent them out on their first mission are obviously divided into two parts. The first, which is shorter, relates to the present. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all contain this narrative. The second part, which is much longer than the first, relates mainly to the distant future. Only Matthew reports this portion of the narrative. In the first part, Christ tells His disciples what to do as apprentices in their apostleship. In the latter, He tells them what they will have to do and endure after they become Apostles on a greater scale and preach the gospel, not only to Jews, but to all the nations.

Some have doubted whether Jesus really delivered the second part of the message on this occasion. Those who hold this position stress the fact that only Matthew connects the message with the trial mission. They also maintain that the larger portion of the message was given by the other evangelists and connected it to other events. In support of this view, reference has also been made to the statement Jesus made to His disciples in His farewell speech before the crucifixion - that until then, He had not spoken to them about the coming persecutions because it was unnecessary while He was with them (John 16:4). Finally, they say, it is unlikely that Jesus would frighten His inexperienced disciples by alluding to dangers which were not really about to happen at the time of their mission in Galilee. These doubts are legitimate because of the way Matthew topically grouped his material. But they are not conclusive. It was natural for Jesus to highlight the first missionary work of the Twelve by giving a message similar to that which Matthew records. In it, He presented the responsibilities, dangers, encouragements, and rewards of being an Apostle. On solemn occasions, it was characteristic for Christ to speak as a prophet who lived in the present but saw into the future. From small beginnings, He looked forward to great, ultimate issues. This Galilean mission, though insignificant and limited compared with the great undertakings that would happen later on, was really an awe-inspiring event. It was the beginning of that vast work for which the Twelve had been chosen. Its scope was broad - it embraced the world. It aimed at setting up the kingdom of God on earth. The Sermon on the Mount was appropriately delivered when the Apostles were first chosen. This new message, which outlined the apostolic duties, was just as appropriate now that the Twelve were beginning the work to which they had been called. Even the references to future dangers contained in the message seem to be natural and timely. They were intended to reassure, rather than frighten the disciples. Remember, the execution of John the Baptist had recently occurred, and the Twelve
were about to begin their missionary work within the boundaries of the tyrant who commanded the brutal murder. Without a doubt, these humble men who were supposed to repeat the Baptist’s message, “Repent,” were not facing the same fate that John had met. But it was natural for them to be afraid. It was also natural for their Master to think of their future when such fears would be anything but imaginary. On both accounts, it was timely for Jesus to say something like this to them: “Dangers are coming, but do not fear.”

This is the essence of the second part of Christ’s instructions to the Twelve. On the other hand, the essential message of the first part is Care not. These two words - Care not, Fear not - are the heart and soul of all that was said at the beginning of the first missionary enterprise and for every evangelistic work that would follow. Here Jesus speaks to all ages and to all times. He tells the church about the kind of spirit that must be evident when she is beginning and sustaining her missionary enterprises. Then they may have His blessing.

Instructions for the Present

The responsibility of beginning their mission without being worried and relying on Providence for the necessities of life was imparted to the Twelve by their Master in very strong and passionate terms. They were instructed to buy nothing for their journey and go just as they were. They must not bring either gold or silver - not even as much as a brass coin could be in their pockets. Nor were they to bring any kind of small bag or knapsack in which to carry food. A change of clothes was not permitted. They were to take no sandals for their feet, nor staff for their hands. If they already had these last few items on the list, it was all right. If not, they could do without them. They might go on their errand of love barefooted and without the aid even of a staff to help them on their weary way. Their feet were shod only with the preparation of the gospel of peace, and they leaned on God’s words of promise, “And your strength will equal your days” (Deut. 33:25).

In these directions Jesus gave to the Twelve, the intrinsic and permanent value is in the spirit and not in the mere letter. The truth of this statement is evident from the various ways the evangelists reported Christ’s words. Mark, for example, records Him saying to His disciples, “If you have a staff in your hand and sandals on your feet and one coat on your back, let that be enough.” Another, Matthew, represents Jesus as saying, “Do not provide anything for this journey - not a coat, shoes, nor staff.” In spirit, the two versions are saying the same thing. But if we insist on the letter of the directives with legal strictness, there is an obvious contrast between them. What Jesus meant to say, in whichever way He said it, was this: “Go at once, and go as you are, and do not concern yourself with food or clothing or anything you need for your body. Trust God for these.” His instructions were given on the principle of the division of labor. He assigned the servants of the kingdom military duty. God was the commissariat department.

Understood in this way, the words of our Lord have validity for all time. They are to be kept in
mind by all who would serve Him in His kingdom. And though the circumstances of the church have greatly changed since these words were first spoken, they have not been forgotten. Many ministers and missionaries have obeyed those instructions almost to the letter, and many more have kept them in their spirit. Have there not been poor students who fulfilled these directives - students who left the humble homes of their parents to be trained for the gospel ministry? They departed without money in their pockets to buy food or to pay fees. They only had simple faith and youthful hope in their hearts. They knew as much about finding their way to the office of pastor as Abraham knew about how to find his way to the promised land when he left his homeland. But, like Abraham, they trusted that He who said to him, “Leave your father’s house,” would be their guide, their shield, and their provider. And if those who started out this way later on became wealthy - that is, they came to the place where their needs were abundantly supplied - what is that but an endorsement by Providence of the law enunciated by the Master, “The worker is worthy of his support” (Matt. 10:10).

The directions that were given to the Twelve about temporal issues before their first mission were meant to be educational for their future work. As they entered the responsibilities of being Apostles, they would have to live - literally - by faith. So Jesus mercifully tried to familiarize them with this habit while He was with them on the earth. Therefore, before He sent them out to preach in Galilee, He essentially said to them, “Go and learn to seek the kingdom of God with a single heart. Do not be concerned about food and clothing. Until you can do that, you are not ready to be my Apostles.” Truly, they had been learning to do that ever since they began following Him. Those who belonged to His company literally lived from day to day and did not worry about tomorrow. But there was a difference between their past situation and the one they were about to enter. In the past, Jesus had been with them. Now they were to be left for a while by themselves. In the past, they had been like young children in a family under the care of their parents, or like young birds in a nest sheltered by their mother’s wing, only needing to open their mouths wide in order to have them filled. Now they were to become like boys leaving their father’s house to serve an apprenticeship, or like fledglings leaving the warm nest in which they were nurtured. They would have to exercise their wings and seek food for themselves.

While Jesus was requiring His disciples to walk by faith, He gave their faith something to rest on. He encouraged them to believe that God would provide what they could not provide for themselves and that He would do it through His people. “And into whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it; and abide there until you go away” (Matt. 10:11). Our observation is that He took it for granted that they would find in every place they went at least one good man with a warm heart who would welcome the messengers of the kingdom to his house and table because of his pure love for God and for the truth. Surely no unreasonable assumption! It would be a pitiful village or town that did not have one single worthy person in it. Even wicked Sodom had a Lot within its walls who entertained angels without knowing it (see Heb. 13:2).

To make sure that His servants received good treatment in every generation wherever the gospel
might be preached, Jesus made it known that He put a high premium on all acts of kindness done toward them. We find this notice at the close of the address He delivered to the Twelve at this time: “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward” (Matt. 10:40-41). And then, with increased passion and seriousness, He added, “And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you he shall not lose his reward” (Matt. 10:42). How much easier to go into Galilee, even into all the world, serving such a sympathetic Master on such terms!

But while encouraging the young evangelists in this way, Jesus did not allow them to go away with the idea that all things would be pleasant in their experience. He helped them understand that they would be received harshly as well as with kindness. They would meet rude people who would refuse to offer them hospitality, and with obstinate, careless people who would reject their message. But even in these cases, He assured them that they would be consoled. If they greeted others with peace and their words were not reciprocated, they would at least get the benefit of their own spirit of good-will, namely that their peace would return to them. If their words were not welcomed by any to whom they preached, they would at least be free from blame. They might shake the dust off their feet and say, “Your blood be upon your own heads, we are clean; we leave you to your doom, and will go elsewhere” (Acts 18:6; see Matt. 10:13-14). These are solemn words and are not to be spoken (as they too often are) by young and inexperienced disciples with pride, impatience, or anger. Rather, they are to be spoken humbly, calmly, and deliberately as part of God’s message to the people. When they are uttered with any other spirit, it is a sign that the preacher has been as much to blame as the hearer for the rejection of his message. Few people have any right to speak these words at all. For it truly requires rare preaching to make unbelievers see how great their guilt is - so great that it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for them. Such preaching has occurred in the past. Christ’s own preaching was of this type. This is demonstrated by His pronouncing fearful doom on those who rejected His words. The Apostles were also to preach in this way. Therefore, to uphold their authority, Jesus solemnly declared that the penalty for despising their word would be no less than for neglecting His own (Matt. 10:14-15).

Instructions for the Future
The remaining instructions refer to the future rather than the present. There are more of these instructions than for the present, but they do not call for a long explanation. As we have said, the message of all of Jesus’ instructions is “Do not fear.” Like the refrain of a song, this exhortation is repeated again and again during Jesus’ address (Matt. 10:26,28,31). From this fact, the Twelve might have thought that their future situation was to be such that it would put fear in them. But Jesus did not presume that they would learn it by inference. He told them about it plainly. “Behold,” He said with the whole history of the church in mind. “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves” (Matt. 10:16). Then He went on to explain in graphic detail the various
forms of danger which the messengers of truth would face. They would be turned over to councils, scourged in synagogues, brought before governors and kings (like Felix, Festus, Herod), and hated by all of them for His name’s sake (Matt. 10:16-18). At the same time He explained to them that this strange treatment was inevitable. It was by necessity the consequence of divine truth acting like a chemical solvent in the world. It separated people into parties according to the spirit that ruled in them. The truth would even divide members of the same family and make them bitterly hostile to each other (Matt. 10:21). And no matter how awful the result might be, it was one for which there was no remedy. Offenses must come: “Do not think,” He said to His disciples, horrified at the dark picture, and perhaps secretly hoping that their Master had painted it with too somber colors. “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household” (Matt. 10:34-36).

**Serpents and Doves**

In the middle of such dangers, two virtues are especially needed - caution and faithfulness. Caution is needed so that God’s servants will not be cut off prematurely or unnecessarily. Faithfulness is needed so that while they live, they may really do God’s work and fight for the truth. In such times, Christ’s disciples must not be afraid. They must be brave and true. While being fearless, however, they must not be foolish. It is not easy to combine these qualities. Conscientious people are prone to be rash, and prudent people tend to be unfaithful. Yet the combination is not impossible. Otherwise, Jesus would not have required it as He did in this discourse. Jesus meant to teach the importance of cultivating the apparently incompatible virtues of caution and faithfulness with this remarkable proverb-precept: “Be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). The serpent is the symbol of cunning; the dove, of simplicity. No creatures can be more unlike each other. Yet Jesus requires His disciples to be - at the same time - serpents in cautiousness and doves in simplicity of purpose and purity of heart. Happy are those who can be both. But if we cannot, let us at least be doves. The dove must come before the serpent in our thinking and in the development of our character. This order can be observed in the history of all true disciples. They begin with spotless sincerity. Then, after being betrayed by others who display generous enthusiasm at first but then act with rashness toward them, they learn the serpent’s virtues. If we reverse the order, as too many do, and begin by being wise and just to the point where others admire us, the result will be that the higher virtue - being innocent as doves - will not only be postponed, but sacrificed. The dove will be devoured by the serpent. The cause of truth and righteousness will be betrayed out of a human desire for self-preservation and worldly advantage.

When a general statement about morality is heard, one naturally wishes to know how it applies to particular situations. Christ dealt with this desire in the deep, pregnant maxim, “Be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves,” by giving examples of its application. The first scenario is
The messengers of truth are brought up before the civil or ecclesiastical tribunals to answer for themselves. Here the wisdom Jesus passed on is, “Beware of men” (Matt. 10:17). “Do not be so simple-minded as to imagine that all people are good, honest, fair, and tolerant. Remember, there are wolves in the world - people full of malice and falsehood. They are unscrupulous and capable of devising the most atrocious charges against you. And they support these charges with the most shameless lies. Keep out of their grasp, if you can. And when you fall into their hands, do not expect honesty, justice, nor generosity.” But how are these kinds of people to be answered? Must deceit be met with deceit, or lies with lies? No. Here is the place for the simplicity of the dove. Cunning and deceit are of no benefit at such a time. Safety lies in trusting Heaven’s guidance and telling the truth. “But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” (Matt. 10:19-20). The counsel that Jesus gave to the Apostles has been confirmed by experience. If the speeches given by those who confessed the truth under the inspiration of the Divine Spirit were collected, what a noble book they would make! It would be a sort of Martyr’s Bible.

Next, Jesus tells about situations where the messengers of His gospel are exposed to popular persecutions. Then He points out how the maxim applies to them. These persecutions - as distinct from judicial proceedings - were common in the experience of the Apostles. Without fail, they happen in all critical periods of history. The ignorant, superstitious people who are filled with prejudice and passion, and who are stirred up by scheming people, obstruct the cause of truth. They form mobs and mock and assault the messengers of God. How, then, are those who receive this bad treatment to act? On the one hand, they are to show the wisdom of the serpent by avoiding the storm of popular ill-will when it arises. And, on the other hand, they are to exhibit the simplicity of the dove by giving the utmost publicity to their message, even though they are conscious of the risk this presents. “But whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next” (Matt. 10:23). Yet, though unshaken by commotion, misrepresentation, and violence, “what I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops” (Matt. 10:27).

A reason is attached to each of these commands. Flight is justified by the remark, “For truly I say to you, you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes” (Matt. 10:23). The coming that is alluded to is the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jewish nation. The meaning is this: The Apostles would barely have enough time before the catastrophe came to go all over the land to warn the people to save themselves from the destruction coming to a rebellious generation. Therefore, they could not afford to remain in any location after its inhabitants had heard and rejected the message. The souls of everyone were equally valuable. And if one city did not receive the Word, perhaps another would (Acts 13:46). The reason attached to the command to greatly publicize the truth was this: “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master” (Matt. 10:24). This is what He was saying: “To
be treated in an evil way by the multitudes who are ignorant and violent is hard to take. But it is
not harder for you than for Me. As you know, I have already experienced malice at the hands of
the people at Nazareth. And I am destined - and you don’t know this yet - to have more bitter
experiences in Jerusalem. Therefore, make sure that you do not hide your light under a bushel
to escape the rage of those who have the qualities of wolves.”

Finally, the disciples are not only supposed to be in danger of being brought to trial, of being
mocked, and of receiving violence. They are also in danger for their lives and are given instruc-
tions about how to act in that extreme situation. Once again the maxim, “Wise as serpents, in-
ocent as doves,” comes into play in both of its parts. In this situation, the wisdom of the serpent
lies in knowing what to fear. Jesus reminds His disciples that there are two kinds of deaths. One
is caused by the sword and the other by being unfaithful to one’s responsibilities. He tells them
in so many words that both are evils to be avoided, if possible. Yet, if a choice must be made, the
latter death is the one most to be dreaded. He said, “And do not fear those who kill the body,
but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in
hell” (Matt. 10:28). He is referring to the Tempter who, when one is in danger, whispers, “Save
yourself even if you have to sacrifice your principles or your conscience.” The simplicity of the
dove in the presence of extreme danger is this: childlike trust in our Father in heaven who
watches over us in His providence. Jesus, using language that was charmingly simple and pas-
sionate, encouraged His disciples to cherish this kind of trust. He told them that God even cared
for the sparrows. He also reminded them that even if they felt insignificant, they at least had a
greater value than many sparrows. They were certainly more valuable than two sparrows whose
money value was only one penny. If God did not neglect even a pair of sparrows, but provided
them with a place in His world where they could build their nest and safely give birth to their
young, would He not care for them as they went forth two by two preaching the doctrine of the
kingdom? Yes, He would! The very hairs of their heads were numbered. Therefore, they could go
forth without fear, trusting their lives to His care. They would also remember that, in the worst
possible case, death was no great evil. For the faithful, there was reserved a crown of life. And
for those who confessed the Son of man, Jesus would grant the honor of being confessed by Him
before His Father in heaven (Matt. 10:32-33).

These, then, were the instructions that Christ gave to the Twelve when He sent them out to
preach and to heal. It was a rare, unprecedented message which seems strange to our mod-
ern ears. We can hardly imagine that such strict requirements could be made, much less that
they would be exactly obeyed. Some readers of these pages may have stood and looked up at
Mont Blanc [the highest mountain in the Italian/French Alps, 15,781 feet above sea level] from
Courmayeur [a town at the foot of Mont Blanc, 4,016 feet above sea level] or Chamounix [also,
Chamonix, on the north side of Mont Blanc, site of the first winter Olympics in 1924]. Such is
our attitude toward this first missionary sermon. It is a mountain at which we gaze in wonder
from a position far below. We can hardly dream of climbing to its summit. Some who are noble,
however, have made the difficult ascent. Among these, the first place of honor must be assigned to the chosen companions of Jesus.