

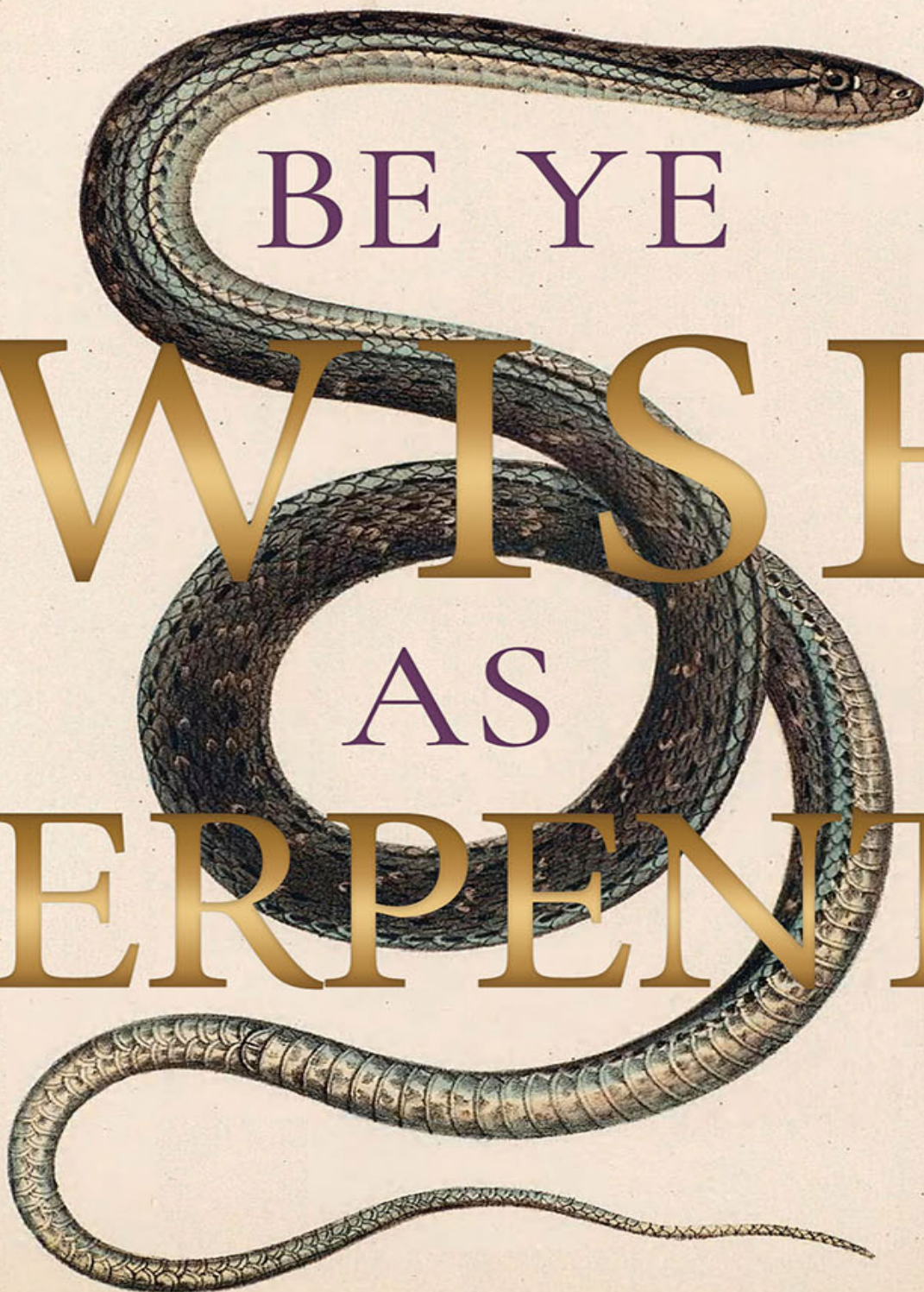
DEFENDING YOUR TESTIMONY
IN THE LATTER DAYS

BE YE

WISE

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SCOTT R. FRAZER

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PART 1

Wisdom of the Serpent



Chapter 1

The Need to Be Serpents

THROUGHOUT THEIR HISTORY, CHRISTIAN CHURCHES HAVE OFTEN *NOT* followed the Savior's edict to be wise as serpents. In its earliest days of Christianity, followers did not try to maintain a low profile. Instead, missionaries preached that the Roman people should not worship the Roman gods. Consequently, Christians were branded as insurgents, which led to their imprisonment and, reportedly, being fed to lions in the Roman Coliseum. A more serpentlike and subtle approach to missionary work had to be implemented for the church to survive.

Centuries later, the Catholic Church built isolated monasteries in northern England. Monasteries were purposefully built away from cities, partly to allow monks to focus on their worship.

However, being built away from populated areas also meant these monasteries were unprotected. In AD 793, the monastery on the remote island of Lindisfarne off the coast of Northumbria was the first to be sacked and plundered by the Vikings. Such raids continued as isolated monasteries were easy pickings for raiders from the Northland. The monks who were killed in these raids almost certainly expected to be protected by God. Had they been wise as serpents, they would have known that such expectations are naïve. That is not how earth life works and there are plenty of examples to prove it.

Persecutions of Christians are found throughout all of history and across the whole earth. Millions of Christians have been killed by their governments,

non-Christian religions, and even other Christian sects with slightly differing beliefs. The religious faithful undoubtedly wondered what they or their families had done to deserve being exiled, beaten, or killed. In truth, most of them had done nothing to deserve their abuse. Like the Saints who fled Nauvoo, many oppressed Christian groups have fled their homes to avoid eradication. It was a sad departure, but as the serpent would remind us, much better than the alternative.

Today, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints apparently still don't listen to their serpent side either. Utah has long been known as the fraud capital of the United States, a veritable mecca for con artists.³ Why is this so? First, strong dovelike tendencies lead many members to trust the sincerity of strangers, making it hard to recognize when someone is lying. Secondly, Church members are well networked within their wards and stakes. When one person is told of a "fantastic investment opportunity," others soon hear about it as well. We live in a time where being naïve will not get you killed . . . but it can cause you to lose a lot of money.

Any serpent can tell you that, "If it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is." Yet many people simply don't listen their serpent side, don't check their facts, and thus choose to learn by sad experience.

IS IT A COMMANDMENT TO BE WISE?

The Lord's counsel to be wise as the serpent should probably be considered a commandment. The commandment to seek wisdom is mentioned so often in the scriptures that we may barely register it.

And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength. (Mosiah 4:27)

Seek not for riches but for wisdom, and behold, the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto you, and then shall you be made rich. (D&C 6:7; repeated word for word in D&C 11:7)

I tell you these things because of your prayers; wherefore, treasure up wisdom in your bosoms . . . (D&C 38:30)

Let him that is ignorant learn wisdom by humbling himself and calling upon the Lord his God . . . (D&C 136:32)

Should we consider this counsel to be simple encouragements by the Savior to learn wisdom? Or do all these verses, taken as a whole, constitute a commandment? The Lord taught not one, but three parables about the need to be wise. Please note that one of the messages in all these parables is to not be foolish! No identifiable sins are committed in them, only foolish acts. The first, comparing the wise man who built his house on a rock with the foolish man who didn't, is found in the seventh chapter of Matthew.

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. (Matthew 7:24–27)

This parable equates not listening and obeying the Savior's teachings with building a house upon the sand. Fools do not recognize many of the important things of life—like following the Lord or building a house on a solid foundation. This parable tries to show us the importance of learning the Lord's teachings and using them as a foundation in our lives.

The other two parables about being wise are both found in Matthew 25. First, we read the parable of the ten virgins.

Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.

And five of them were wise, and five were foolish.

They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them:

But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.

And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him.

Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps.

And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out.

But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves.

And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut.

Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.

But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not.

Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh. (Matthew 25:1–13)

These five wise virgins had a very serpentlike wisdom about them. First, they were practical enough to bring extra oil in vessels with their lamps. Then, when the five foolish virgins asked for some of their oil, the five wise virgins refused them. “Not so; lest there be not enough for us!” they replied. Theirs was a very practical and wise assessment of what was necessary to be admitted into the marriage. Essentially, the wise virgins replied to the foolish virgins, “Your lack of planning is not my emergency.” Once again, we have multiple meanings. Be wise, carry extra oil, and be ready for the Savior when He returns.

Immediately after the virgins’ parable, we read the parable of the talents—which once again reinforces the commandment to be wise.

For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods.

And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey. (Matthew 25:14–15)

The first two servants traded with their master’s money and doubled his investment. But the third servant buried the one talent he was given and made nothing. To the first two servants, the lord stated, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:23). The third servant was not so congratulated.

Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed:

And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine.

His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed:

Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. (Matthew 25:24–27)

The lord calls his unprofitable servant both *wicked* and *slothful*. Is it a sin to bury money in the ground? No, not exactly, but apparently a lack of wisdom does *not* get you into the “joy of thy Lord” either. From his own admission, the unprofitable servant knew that his lord expected a profit on the one talent he was given. He was either too foolish or lazy to figure out how to secure that profit.

The parable concludes,

And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:30)

Outside of being a poor investor, the servant could have been a righteous man. But from these three parables, it seems apparent that God expects us to be wise. He is not referring only to knowledge of the gospel and scriptures. Taking these three parables in order, it seems that the Lord wants men who understand the basics of construction, women who are prepared, and servants who know something about financial investment. Admittedly, I may be taking these parables a little too literally in making my point. However, the Savior chose parables that teach us to apply wisdom in everyday matters. The Lord expects wisdom in all you do.

THE WORD “CHRISTLIKE” DOES NOT ONLY MEAN “DOVELIKE”

The word “Christlike” obviously means being like Christ. However, over many years, the definition of the word has drifted to mean “dovelike.” Indeed, it appears that our interpretation of Christlike has drifted well beyond what the scriptures actually teach about the Savior.

For example, in the 1990s, the question, “What Would Jesus Do?”, or its acronym WWJD, became very popular in religious circles. Bracelets and necklaces with WWJD embroidered or stamped on them were widespread. The assumption was that, in handling a difficult person, the Savior would always be kind, non-judgmental, and forgiving—and that we all should try to be such a person as well. This depiction defines the Savior as being a very one-dimensional being, responding to *everyone* in one predictable and lenient way. In reality, how could anyone know how Jesus would respond to a specific individual? His response would depend completely upon the person in question. The Lord may as easily condemn the person, as He did the scribes and Pharisees throughout the *entire chapter* of Matthew 23. Verses 13 and 14 are especially harsh.

But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.

Or Jesus might both teach and call the person to repentance as He did with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4). Or He might indeed be non-judgmental, as He was with the woman caught in adultery (John 8).

The idea that being Christlike means only being dovelike is simply not supported in the scriptures. Do you remember the account of Jesus cleansing the temple? In John 2, we read,

And the Jews' passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem,
And found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting:

And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; (John 2:13–15)

That doesn't seem very . . . dovelike. When the Savior needed to be the serpent and make His point, He did. Another good example of the Lord being very clear about a teaching is given in Matthew 18. Jesus had just invited a child to come to the center of His group of listeners. He remarked that anyone who helps one of God's children would be blessed. Then He continues with a warning to those who might do otherwise.

But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matthew 18:6)

The Lord did not sugarcoat this declaration at all. It was reputed that the Mafia used similar techniques in dealing with traitors in their organization. Yet drowning would be *better* than what would happen to you if you were to offend one of Jesus Christ's little ones. It seems the Savior is a bit protective of His children. What the Savior said here was entirely appropriate, well-spoken . . . and very serpentlike.

REPENTANCE FOR BEING FOOLISH

If it is a commandment to be wise, then shouldn't we repent when we are unwise? Such repentance doesn't seem to happen very often. The Church has produced a video called, "Where Justice, Love, and Mercy Meet"⁴ that I highly recommend. It is based on a story told by Jeffrey R. Holland in the April 2015 General Conference. Elder Holland does a great job of telling this story, so I will simply quote his words.

Without safety ropes, harnesses, or climbing gear of any kind, two brothers—Jimmy, age 14, and John, age 19 (though those aren't their real names)—attempted to scale a sheer canyon wall in Snow Canyon State Park in my native southern Utah. Near the top of their laborious climb, they discovered that a protruding ledge denied them their final few feet of

ascent. They could not get over it, but neither could they now retreat from it. They were stranded. After careful maneuvering, John found enough footing to boost his younger brother to safety on top of the ledge. But there was no way to lift himself. The more he strained to find finger or foot leverage, the more his muscles began to cramp.

Panic started to sweep over him, and he began to fear for his life. Unable to hold on much longer, John decided his only option was to try to jump vertically in an effort to grab the top of the overhanging ledge.

Before trying this desperate maneuver, John decided to say a prayer. He begins, “Heavenly Father, I’m so sorry . . .”⁵

At this point in the video, I was moved to tears. In many Church talks, I have heard speakers relate the prayers that they offered up when they found themselves in a desperate or dangerous situation. Yet, I don’t remember any of them starting out their prayer with, “Father, I’m so sorry.” Yet, prayers of this nature really *should* begin with those very words.

Maybe it’s because Christians think that repentance is only for apologizing for our *unrighteous* acts. Or it might be because we hate to admit when we have done something foolish. We have a host of great excuses, starting with “I didn’t know!” or “It’s not my fault!”. But when we find ourselves in any situation for which we need to pray for help from God, we might consider beginning the prayer with something like,

Dear Heavenly Father, I am in a desperate situation, and I need Your help. I am sorry for my part in getting myself into this predicament. I have made unwise decisions which helped create this mess. I see that now, and I ask Thy forgiveness.

Let’s face it—most of our predicaments are caused, in part, by our own decisions. Throughout my career, I often found myself praying that I could find a new job. My job at the times of such prayers had not turned out as I had expected. Whose fault was that? Though I wanted to put the blame on someone else, I had accepted those jobs. The fault was mine and I had to accept that responsibility. The Lord was very patient with me during those days.

Drawing again on the above story, John and Jimmy had not actually sinned by climbing the cliff wall in Snow Canyon. But they had made a very poor decision and had put their lives in serious danger. Many other young people have died from making far less reckless decisions. The beginning of John's prayer was very appropriate. By the way, the story has a happy ending.

John made the vertical leap—and his younger brother Jimmy was there to catch him and pull him up to safety. The brothers walked away as wiser young men.

The fact that God wants you to learn wisdom should not be surprising. A big part of the reason for dividing people up into separate kingdoms at the end of mortal life is to sort out those who can be trusted with priesthood power. God doesn't want to share power with an unrighteous person, who will use it for his or her own purposes. However, God also does not want to give His power to a foolish person, who will unthinkingly misuse it. I have known kind, faithful members of the Church for whom I would throw open the gates of the celestial kingdom. But I would not wish to endow them with power, not for many years at least. Their lives on Earth were a mess due to an ongoing string of poor decisions. As Spiderman's Uncle Ben said, "With great power comes great responsibility." If someone cannot be trusted with great responsibility, he or she should not be given great power. Thus, the Lord encourages us to learn wisdom, so we are able to accept great responsibilities.

To conclude, Jesus Christ was a healthy combination of dove and serpent—and He wants us to follow His example. To follow that example, we need to be willing to be serpentlike when the situation demands it. When exactly do we have to be like serpents in our judgments? I can think of only two places—inside the home and outside it.

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3. Dennis Romboy, “Does Utah deserve the title ‘fraud capital of the United States?’” *Deseret News*, 29 Apr. 2019, <https://www.deseret.com/2019/4/29/20671965/does-utah-deserve-the-title-fraud-capital-of-the-united-states>.
 4. “Where Justice, Love, and Mercy Meet,” *Media Library: Inspirational Messages—Missionary Teaching*, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2017-01-001-where-justice-love-and-mercy-meet?lang=eng>.
 5. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Where Justice, Love, and Mercy Meet,” April 2015 General Conference, churchofjesuschrist.org.

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