Book 4

Sunday January 26, 1975

"HAVE YOU BEEN CHEATED LATELY?" Matthew 10:16-23

At one point in his ministry as JESUS was preparing to send his followers into the surrounding towns and countryside, he said, "Behold I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Jesus was giving his followers a warning and advice.

Throughout history, many of the followers of Jesus, those of us who call ourselves Christians, have often felt like "sheep in the midst of wolves." A common complaint particularly in our time from all kinds of people is the feeling that we are being cheated and taken advantage of. And there's some truth to it. Note these items among many.

A few months ago, a long article appeared on the front page of the Wall Street Journal with the headline -- SHORT COUNTS MEAN THAT THE CONSUMER PAYS MORE FOR LESS. Who feels more like sheep among wolves than the consumer?

The article began with the story of a man who got into the habit of counting things that he bought in packages and bottles -- paper clips, carbon paper, facial tissues, thumtacks, you name it. What he discovered was that he and others were being continually shortchanged.

It all started when he bought a bottle of 100 vitamin E tablets from a Miami discount store. "When I looked inside, I knew right away there was no way 100 of them were in there," he said. Sure enough, a count showed the bottle to be 10% short. After pressing his complaint, the manufacturer pleaded no contest to three counts of fraud and paid a fine. The packer claimed that the electric eye counter malfunctioned; the transparent pills sometimes failed to register on the device. But in that case there should have been more than 100 pills in the bottle, yet that kind of mistake rarely seemed to occur.

The man who made the discovery, then began to count everything and since he was a disc jockey with a regular radio program, he began to report what he found and got hundreds of others involved in the same practice of counting things. Short counts showed up again and again. People found boxes advertised as containing 100 screws with only 60 inside,

a package of 10 resistors with only six and scores of violations ranging from cough drops to patent medicines.

On the average, the products checked were 10% to 30% short. Some packages contained only half the amount advertised. The Wall Street Journal then conducted its own survey and confirmed that short-counting may be so widespread as to represent a considerable drain on already strained consumer budgets. One chain-store manager justified the short counting by saying--"Customers cheat by stealing. We get even by shorting them."

It's no wonder people everywhere feel cheated--like sheep among wolves. We remember the stories in our local papers some time ago when it was discovered that some meat packages did not weigh as much as the label said. And just recently another story told about an Instant Coffee not having as many ounces of coffee in the jar as printed on the label.

There's a lack of confidence among people because they have the impression they are being taken by the oil companies, the politicians and almost everyone.

The most unusual story I came across recently was about a man in Chicago, a TV service man who while making his rounds found an expensive brief case in a phone booth. He was in a hurry so he took it with him and did't bother to open it. That night when he got home he told his wife to see if there was anything inside the brief case which would lead them to the owner. His wife took it to the kitchen and opened it and a moment later shouted, "Come quick!" Inside the brief case was $1300 in cash, airline tickets, a checkbook and business papers. It was more money than either of them had ever seen at one time. "A man who could carry around that much money must be pretty well off,"the man told his wife. And here they were worrying about paying the rent.

"We'd better try to find the owner," the man continued. Some papers in the briefcase told them the owner's name and that he was a salesman from Ohio and was staying in the Regency Hyatt House near O'Hare Field. They phoned the hotel and said to the man on the phone, "Sir, did you lose something?" The man excitedly said, "My brief case, yes, did you find it?"

"We have it," they said, and gave the man their home address. "I'll be right there," he said. A little later that evening, he came to their modest home. He was a man in his early 40's, wearing a well-cut expensive suit. He quickly checked the contents of the brief case. "We've taken nothing,"the couple said. "Yes, everything is here," replied the owner. You are an honest couple. There aren't very many people who are that honest." "It's your property," the couple replied." "Well, I'm glad somebody as honest as you found it. I want to give you a reward." "You don't have to give us a reward," they said. "Well, I want to give you something." So he took his checkbook and a pen and wrote a check for $25.00.

The next day, the man took the check to the cashier at the Sears store and cashed it and gave the money to his wife to help pay the rent. A couple of days later, the check bounced.

What is to be our Christian reaction to being cheated and to all the other evil around us? A common, but not Christian response is cynicism. People say, "Almost everybody does it, so there's nothing that can be done about it, and maybe we should do it do." A letter to the editor in a news magazine put it this way, "We must be honest with ourselves and view the Watergate affair as just another episode of standard American procedures. Lying, spying, eavesdropping and misrepresenting have always been elements of American life, in business, advertising, legal affairs, medicine and private affairs. So what's new? Why the outrage?"

That's unhealthy cynicism at its worst. But what is to be our Christian response when we feel we've been cheated, when we feel like sheep among wolves?

Jesus said, "Be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves." In other words, be as wise and watchful and realistic as serpents, but also be as innocent and open and hopeful as doves. The two are not contradictory. They need each other for balance in our CHristian living.

In telling us to be as wise as serpents, Jesus is counseling against a naive optimism which is unaware of the individual's and society's sinful nature. He is advising us to be realistic and watchful of our own shortcomings and those of other people and groups.

To be as wise as a serpent is to be aware that people will attempt to cheat us from time to time. We will meet dishonest persons. People will not always accept us as we are. We are to be on the lookout for it. There is injustice and unfairness in the world. There are those who lie, cheat and steal.

We are to have a healthy cynicism. This is an attitude which keeps us at the job to be done because we do not expect quick and perfect results. Part of the problem with the radical student movement in the 60's and other radical movements as well is that they expected to achieve perfection and complete change in society over a rather short period of time. Then when it didn't happen and when they discovered imperfections even within their own ranks, those involved became discouraged and gave up.

A healthy cynicism, people who are wise as serpents, set up checks and balances. They may count the number of aspirins in a bottle from time to time and if there is a short count, take steps to see that it doesn't happen again.

But at the same time that Jesus warns us to be as wise as serpents, he also tells us to be as innocent as doves.

We often call children innocent because they are open, trustful and hopeful. So when Jesus advises us to be as innocent as doves, he means that we should go into the world armed with faith and hope in spite of the evil around us. People who have lost faith and hope are not going to work hard for justice. It takes faith to believe that even our small efforts can contribute to the sum total of justice and honesty in the world.

Trust and hope are the powers that keep us productive and working and prevent a healthy cynicism from becoming malignant.

And here is where the church and religion are so important. True faith and hope rest on the conviction that there is a God who transcends all that we do and that in the end God's goodness will win even though we many times fail. Because of our faith in God, we know that our love and labor for the good are not in vain. Justice and truth are not lost causes. God is not a loser. But God often wins slowly through love and not quickly through force.

Jesus did not come with an army to destroy cheating and evil. Rather he worked with and through persons and groups. His salvation comes through sacrifice and suffering. God's ways are not always our ways.

As Christians we believe in the over-all justice of God, and therefore in the possibility of wholeness. We believe there is given an ordering of life which injustice and other evil cannot finally ever eliminate. So we work with hope.

Also to be "innocent as doves" means that even though others around us may cheat, lie, and mislead us, we are not to do the same. Just because it seems like everybody is doing something, does not mean that we have to do it or have the right to do it. As Christians we are called to stand firm.

To be innocent as doves also means that we are able to openly admit when we are wrong. Some years ago in a book entitled, "THE FOLKLORE OF MANAGEMENT" by Clarence Randall, a remarkable statement appeared. Randall was one of the most successful and respected business leaders when he retired as president of Inland Steel.

In a chapter entitled, "The Myth of the Rugged Individualist" Randall makes a statement that can only be made by a big person. He was speaking of the broadening of social benefits during the last three decades. "All of this revolutionary social change has come about in my day--workman's compensation, umempolyment compensation, social security, old age benefits, insured education plans, and all the rest of our complex fabric of social protection of the individual. Then he makes a most refreshing and remarkable statement. "Almost without exception, I resisted each new change. Almost invariably, I was wrong, as it turned out."

How rarely we hear a person say this, even in private, much less in print or publicly.

What would it be like in this world of cheating, false advertising, lying and misrepresentation if only for a week, all of us would innocent as doves and therefore open and honest.

The cigarette manufacturer would say, "My brand is about the same as all the other brands, with a slightly different flavor and it won't do a thing for you except reinforce the smoking habit.

The TV commentator would say, "I simply don't understand this most recent development in the Middle East. It's too soon to digest it, and enough facts aren't in yet. Please wait a few weeks until the situation is stablized and I've had time to study the problem.

The film producer would say to us: "Passionate Haystack is the best picture we could make with the material on hand; it has a few exciting moments, which we hope will compensate for the inferior acting and absurd story."

The Army General would say: I suppose I could call this week's maneuvers a tactical withdrawal of our forces, but the plain fact is that we were outsmarted and forced to retreat ignominiously. I'll try to do better next week.

The merchant would say to us: The fashions are pretty silly this spring, and some of the goods are not what they were when we could rely on honest craftsmanship, but you may find a few things that you like.

The airline would say to us: There's heavy fog in the west, and the plane may leave in an hour or so,and then again it may not. We have no way of telling, and maybe you ought to call the depot and make a train reservation before it's too late.

The auto manufacturer would say to us: This year's models are just face-lifted a little from last year's. We made a few minor improvements, but so have our competitors and there's not a great deal to choose between them except for inessential matters of styling.

The politician would say to us: I'll give the public as much service as I can, but the organization comes first, debts have to be repaid and loyalties must be rewarded. All I can promise you is that the opposition won't be much better.

Perhaps all this is too much to expect. Have you been cheated lately? If you have, don't spread the disease. Try to be wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove. Amen.