

A Living Belief Book

*Lessons from
the Lives of the*

TWELVE DISCIPLES



R. Herbert

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the Lives of the*

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About the Author: The author served as an ordained minister and church pastor for a number of years and holds an earned Ph.D. degree in the languages, cultures and archaeology of the ancient Near East and biblical world. He writes for a number of Christian publications and for the websites TacticalChristianity.org and LivingWithFaith.org. His other e-books are available for free download from those websites and from FreeChristianEBooks.org.

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INTRODUCTION

It is often said that the twelve disciples were ordinary men God used in an extraordinary manner. That is an apt description of the individuals Jesus chose as his closest followers – he purposely passed over the elite and influential of society and chose simple, uneducated, but hard-working men with undistinguished backgrounds.

Yet these same simple men went on to “turn the world upside down” with the truth they had been given (Acts 17:6 CSB) and became some of the most influential individuals the world has ever known. Without their inspired dedication and work, it is possible that you and I might never have heard of Jesus of Nazareth. It is because of their work and sacrifice that we know him and his teachings as well as we do.

We are all familiar with the stories about some of these men, especially Peter, and – because of the books of the New Testament that they wrote – Matthew and John also seem familiar to us. But most of us know very little about the majority of the twelve disciples as individuals. That is because we have very few facts about the lives of apostles like Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, and Judas; and of some of the disciples, such as Bartholomew, Philip, and Simon the Zealot, we know no more from the Scriptures than their names. Nevertheless, a great many books have been written that attempt to provide word-portraits of all these men – with chapters that often compress what is known of a few of them and stretch out what is known of the rest!

This book is different. Instead of focusing on the stories we know well about Peter and the other leading disciples and what may be unfounded legends and traditions regarding the others, whenever possible this book looks at what the Bible tells us about the group as a whole – something we often read over without thought. Yet what the New Testament tells us about the group Jesus chose is not simply background information and often teaches some profoundly important lessons that were written for our education.

This does not mean that we will ignore some of the stories regarding individual disciples in this book – sometimes those stories are examples that clearly apply to the overall group – but the focus of the following chapters is mainly on what we can learn from the experiences, failures, and successes of the group as a whole.

Although most of the information we have about the twelve disciples comes from the four gospels, there is much additional information in later books of the New Testament that we will also examine. In fact, there is much more in the New Testament regarding the disciples as a group than many people realize – and some of what is there may surprise you.

**PART ONE:
CALLED TO LEARN**

1. WHO WERE THE DISCIPLES?

Although we will be looking primarily at the twelve disciples of Jesus as a group in this book, it is important that we understand who the individual disciples were in order to see how and why the group acted as it did in a number of situations. We may be familiar with the names of many or all of the twelve, but it is still possible to be confused regarding the identities of some of them.

Who Was Who?

There is often confusion regarding the individual disciples because some of them were known by multiple names. For example, Judas, son of James, seems to be called Thaddeus in the Gospel of Matthew and that of Mark to avoid confusion between that Judas and Judas Iscariot. Other individuals may also be confused because they shared the same name. Following the order given in Mark 3:16–19, these are the men who became the twelve disciples:

Simon – Also known as Peter, Simon Peter, and Cephas, Peter was probably the oldest of the Twelve (as explained in Chapter 2 of this book) and the only one said to be married (1 Corinthians 9:5). He was one of Jesus’ three main disciples along with James and John.

James – Also known as the son of Zebedee, and called “James the Greater” (referring to his height, age, or importance), James was one of the three leading disciples along with Peter and John.

John – James’ brother and probably the youngest of the Twelve, John was originally a disciple of John the Baptist. “The one Jesus loved” (John 13:23, CSB) was one of the leading disciples with Peter and James.

Andrew – Simon Peter’s younger brother was a leading disciple along with Peter, James, and John. According to the Gospel of John, Andrew was the first of the twelve disciples Jesus called and

while Peter is often credited with being the first to recognize Jesus as the Messiah (Matthew 16:13–20), Andrew not only brought Peter to Jesus, but also told him Jesus was the Messiah! (see John 1:41).

Philip – Like Peter and Andrew, Philip was from the town of Bethsaida by the Sea of Galilee. He brought the disciple called Nathanael or Bartholomew to Jesus.

Bartholomew – The name Bartholomew most likely comes from the Aramaic *Bar-Talmai*, meaning “son of Talmai,” which would explain why he also seems to have been known as Nathanael – which was probably his personal name.

Matthew – Also known as Levi (his Hebrew name), Matthew was a tax collector in Capernaum and became the author of the gospel that bears his name.

Thomas – Actually not a name, “Thomas” comes from the Aramaic word *te’oma*, meaning “twin.” Also called Didymos (Greek for “the twin”), tradition says his name was “Judas Thomas” – Judas the twin. He is often (undeservedly) known as “Doubting Thomas.”

James – Also called “James the Less” or “James the Lesser,” he is only mentioned in the lists of disciples, so little is known of him.

Thaddeus – This disciple is also called Jude, Jude of James, Judas of James, Judas Thaddeus, and Lebbaeus. Some identify him with Jesus’ brother Jude (Mark 6:3), but this is highly unlikely.

Simon the Zealot – This individual is only mentioned in the four lists of the disciples found in the New Testament. It is doubtful that he is the Simon mentioned in Matthew 10:4 and Mark 3:18.

Judas Iscariot – “Iscariot” probably refers to Kerioth, a town located south of Jerusalem in Judea. After he betrayed Jesus, Judas was replaced by Matthias (Acts 1:20–26), but this replacement apostle is not mentioned again in the New Testament.

Discovering the Disciples

What kind of men were these disciples? We know that as individuals they were widely different. Some among the Twelve were fishermen, of course, and we also know that one (Matthew) was a tax collector, and one (Simon the Zealot) seems to have been a revolutionary. We get glimpses of their individual personalities not only in the Bible, but also in the writings of the early church fathers. Those later writings are occasionally quoted in this book – though we must be careful in using extra-biblical sources because spurious legends and stories quickly sprang up about the disciples after their deaths. On the other hand, history can help give us an idea of some of the characteristics probably shared by many in the group.

We know that almost all of the disciples were from Galilee, and the first-century Jewish historian Josephus described the people of Galilee this way: “They were always fond of innovation and by nature disposed to change and delighted in sedition. They were always ready to follow the leader and to begin an insurrection. Quick in temper and given to quarreling, they were very courageous men.” We can certainly see some of these traits in some of the disciples, though in others not so much.

Interestingly, the same can be said of the description of the Galileans that is found in the Jewish Talmud: “They were more anxious for honor than for gain, quick-tempered, impulsive, emotional, easily aroused by an appeal to adventure, loyal to the end.” This description certainly fits what we know of the twelve disciples in many ways and although they were definitely not loyal to Jesus at the time of his arrest, they eventually showed great loyalty in their later lives.

Overall, we will certainly see many of these traits in what the New Testament tells us of the disciples as a group, and keeping these things in mind we can look now, in the next few chapters, at the ages of the disciples, why they were all male, and how they were selected.

2. HOW OLD WERE THE DISCIPLES?

Perhaps the most common misconception about the twelve disciples Jesus chose is regarding their ages. We have all seen pictures of Jesus teaching the disciples – adult males about the same age as Jesus himself. But is this representation of the disciples accurate, or could the disciples have been significantly younger?

We should keep in mind that only one part of Jesus' calling and training of disciples was unique – the calling. In Judaism of the first century many rabbis or teachers taught students and trained them to be rabbis like themselves. The major difference was that young men wanting to be taught in this way usually sought out a teacher. Jesus, on the other hand, directly called his students himself – a fact he stressed in his teaching (John 15:16).

But apart from this aspect of “student selection,” Jesus' role as a rabbi or teacher was not unusual for its time, and it is worth remembering that most students selected by rabbis were younger – commonly in their teens – and training as a disciple under a rabbi would usually begin between the ages of 13 and 15. It is perfectly possible, therefore, that a number of Jesus' disciples were younger than we usually think, and there is some biblical indication that this might have been the case.

The apostle John is known to have lived till very late in the first century, but while we presume he was perhaps younger than the others and that they might not have lived as long, we should remember that the other disciples seem to have been martyred earlier in the century – very possibly well before they would normally have died.

Also, consider the interesting story regarding the occasion Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum and the collectors of the two-drachma temple tax came to Peter and asked, “Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?” Jesus then told Peter to catch a fish – which miraculously had a four-drachma coin in its mouth – and to pay the tax for Jesus and for himself with it (Matthew 17:24-27). It might

seem odd that Jesus only provided the tax money for Peter and himself and not for the other disciples – until we realize that the tax only had to be paid by those age twenty and above.

This fact certainly indicates that Peter alone of the disciples was older than twenty – a possibility which may throw light on the fact that Peter seems always to be the one who speaks for the other disciples (Acts 2:14–41; etc.), why he is the only disciple said to be married at the time of Christ's ministry (Matthew 8:14–15; etc.), and why he was given such a prominent role in the very early church (Galatians 2:9).

Jesus himself referred to his disciples as “children” on several occasions (John 13:33; etc.), making it unlikely that they were all adults.

Young but Capable

But if many of the disciples were in fact younger than we often think, this would have had no bearing on their ability to act as witnesses of Jesus' miracles and resurrection. Jewish law accepted the witness of young men down to the age of *bar mitzvah*, which usually was celebrated in the early teens.

Ultimately, the exact ages of the disciples do not matter, or we would have been told what ages they were. On the other hand, recognizing the likelihood of the relative youth of most of Jesus' chosen followers can help us understand some things that might otherwise seem unclear in the New Testament.

There is also a message in the relative youth of the disciples. The young, along with women and foreigners, represented a subgroup of society that was not given a great deal of respect. That is why we find Paul encouraging his young assistant Timothy “Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young” (1 Timothy 4:12). Just as Jesus accepted women among his wider group of disciples (Luke 8:1–3), he also showed the young were capable of learning (Luke 2:41–47), and so it should perhaps not be surprising if he selected a number of younger men among his disciples.

Returning to how young Jews became students of a rabbi, it is helpful to remember that young men did not simply turn up at a rabbi's door and expect to be taught. There were relatively few rabbis and many young men. Those who sought out a rabbi to follow were examined and tested by the older teacher and only a select few were chosen. Being selected to follow a rabbi and to continue his teaching was viewed as an exceptional honor in that society – perhaps indicating why we are told many of the disciples Jesus chose dropped everything they were doing and followed him immediately (Matthew 4:18–22).

There is a lesson in this for us today. Whatever the age of Jesus' disciples at their calling, it is certain that the opportunity would have been regarded as a great honor and privilege – to be one of so few selected from so many. Perhaps, in terms of our own lives and calling, that is something we should often remember.

3. WHY WERE THE DISCIPLES ALL MEN?

Many people wonder why Jesus – whose teachings and actions so thoroughly included women – only chose males when selecting his twelve disciples. Although it is difficult to pinpoint a single issue that we can say was the most important, there were probably several reasons women were not included in the Twelve, and we will look at them here.

Practical Reasons

First, through no fault of their own, women in first-century Judea largely led a more sheltered and protected life compared to men. It was men who conducted most outdoor occupations and who traveled for trade and other reasons. So it is probably true that in that society Jesus knew men would be better prepared to fulfill the roles he was giving the Twelve, which would involve traveling great distances – often in difficult circumstances and in danger of attacks from lawless individuals as well as the kind of harsh physical beatings from local authorities we know the apostle Paul endured (2 Corinthians 11:25; etc.). While it is not that women could not have taken on these roles, it would certainly have been much harder for them to succeed in their mission in that time and place.

Religious Reasons

Another reason why women were not included in the inner group of twelve that Jesus selected is doubtless found in the religious backdrop of the Old Testament. Under the Old Covenant instituted at Sinai, religious leadership positions were reserved for men. In choosing only men as the disciples who would lead his early church, Jesus was being consistent with the Old Testament legislation which required that society's spiritual leaders – the priests – be males (Exodus 40:12–15). In this, as in other areas, Jesus followed the Old Testament legislation in order to fulfill the law (Matthew

5:17) in all things. It is evident that after his death and resurrection, once the New Covenant began, Jesus did utilize women in very important roles.

Cultural Reasons

During Christ's physical ministry, the original disciples were sent only to preach to the Jewish nation (Matthew 10:5). And because the initial thrust of the disciples' ministry was directed exclusively at the Jews, it was necessary that Jewish men be appointed to complete this task. Sadly, in Judaism at that time women had few legal rights, were not regarded as worthy of being given formal religious education, and had no participation in Jewish public life – and it was inconceivable that they would have been accepted if they had been sent as religious instructors to their society. So it was inevitable that the disciples who would be the first missionaries to the Jewish people would be Jewish males. After the resurrection, this also changed as early Christian communities opened previously closed educational and social spheres to women.

Symbolic Reasons

The ancient nation of Israel had begun with the twelve sons of the patriarch Jacob who became the ancestors and symbolic fathers of the twelve tribes. By choosing twelve male disciples to continue his work, Jesus symbolically showed that his church would constitute a new community of God's people, a new Israel (Galatians 6:16), which would be based on its own twelve "patriarchs." The New Testament clearly shows this symbolic continuity between the tribal patriarchs and the twelve disciples as their New Covenant counterparts.

Jesus told the Twelve "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19:28); and in the book of Revelation we read of the new Jerusalem seen in vision by the apostle John: "On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel ... The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the

names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Revelation 21:12–14). So, the significance of Jesus’ twelve apostles as symbolic types of the twelve male patriarchs might not have been clear if women had been included among the core disciples.

The Women Were There

The New Testament makes it clear that Jesus taught women, that he had many female disciples, that they served alongside him, and that they performed invaluable support roles during his ministry (Luke 8:1–3; etc.). After his death, those roles were expanded dramatically, and women were given more visible responsibilities – including being the first witnesses and heralds of his resurrection. Nevertheless, for all the reasons we have looked at in this chapter, it was necessary that the first core disciples Jesus chose would be men.

We must remember that God does not often change human culture in order to accomplish his will. More often, he brings about his plans within the constraints of human society – working with cultures, just like individuals, despite their flaws and failings. Through progressive revelation down through history, God has revealed better ways to his servants who in turn preached these ways to their societies. If there is a lesson in this for us, it is simply that we must remember to trust God’s plans despite the limitations and failings of the society around us, and to remember our own part in carrying the message of God’s way of life to those who do not know it.

4. HOW WERE THE DISCIPLES CHOSEN?

Many people think that the twelve disciples were chosen by Jesus without any previous interaction – as when Jesus was walking by the sea and called Peter and other fishermen from their boats (Matthew 4:18–22; Mark 1:16–20). But these verses probably show the disciples’ initial calling as part of a larger group. The New Testament is clear that Christ already knew the twelve men he then selected from among his disciples – that these were individuals who had traits Jesus already knew he could work with. The Gospel of Luke tells us:

Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he *called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them*, whom he also designated apostles. (Luke 6:12–13, emphasis added)

Most biblical scholars actually place this event around the middle of Jesus’ ministry. We see in the account that the twelve followers Jesus called to train as his special assistants are called both disciples and apostles. While the word “disciple” refers to a learner or follower, the word “apostle” means “one who is sent out.” During Jesus’ ministry the twelve key followers were usually called disciples, though after his resurrection they were mainly referred to as apostles. However, the terms are used somewhat interchangeably in the New Testament.

Matthew continues to use the term “disciples” of the Twelve even after the resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 28), and there were also other apostles in a generic sense. For example, Barnabas is referred to as an apostle (Acts 13:2; 14:14) and the same word is used to refer to Titus (2 Corinthians 8:23) and Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25). So, in the broader sense, anyone who was “sent” could be called an apostle, and even Christ himself is called an apostle in his role as a messenger of God (Hebrews 3:1).

But although Jesus had many disciples, and there were many who acted as apostles in the general sense, the twelve individuals Jesus selected stand as a unique group that formed the foundation of the New Testament church after Jesus himself (Ephesians 2:20). In fact, the vast majority of occurrences of the words disciple and apostle in the New Testament refer to these twelve individuals.

The qualifications of this type of apostle were:

- (1) To have been personally selected by Jesus (Luke 6:12–13; etc.);
- (2) To have seen the resurrected Christ (1 Corinthians 9:1; etc.);
- (3) To have been directly commissioned by him (Acts 1:8; 9:6; etc.);
- (4) To have been given the ability to perform miracles (Acts 2:43; 2 Corinthians 12:12).

Matthias, who replaced Judas, was an exception in not fulfilling some of these requirements, but he was clearly made an apostle in unique circumstances to fill a specific gap.

Why were there twelve disciples or apostles in the original group? In the Bible, the number is frequently associated with wholeness or completeness (Revelation 7:4–8; etc.), but the more specific reason is that Jesus told the Twelve:

I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Luke 22:29–30)

The twelve are all named in four places in the New Testament: in three of the gospels (Matthew 10:2–4; Mark 3:16–19; and Luke 6:13–16 – John’s Gospel does not provide a list) and in the book of Acts which gives a list of all but Judas (Acts 1:13), though it mentions him elsewhere. These lists are given not simply as historical records, but also to exclude false apostles who might

claim to have been chosen in the same way. The lists themselves have small differences, but usually pair the various individuals. Three pairs were brothers: Peter and Andrew, James and John, the other James and Lebbeus (surnamed Thaddaeus). But the other disciples are also often mentioned in pairs, and they were all sent out two by two in order to help each other during Jesus' ministry (Matthew 10:1–4).

It is less often realized that the New Testament lists of the disciples also group them into three groups of four, although the names may appear in different orders within the groups. For instance, Mark 3:18 and Luke 6:15 both name Matthew before Thomas, but in Matthew's Gospel Thomas is placed before Matthew (one of many indications the Gospel of Matthew was written by Matthew and not by someone else). But the three groups of four remain consistent, and a name found in any of the three groups is never exchanged for a name in another group.

The ordering of these groups seems to show their relative importance or responsibilities. For example, the first group of four – Peter, Andrew, James and John – were allowed to be with Jesus when he performed an early, private, miracle (Mark 1:29–31). The same four were also among the few allowed to be present at the raising of Jairus's daughter (Luke 8:49–55), and it was this group of four who came to Jesus privately and asked him about the signs of the end of the age (Mark 13:3–4).

For some reason, as time went by, Andrew is mentioned fewer times than the other members of this group, so we tend to think of Peter, James, and John as a select group of three – as when they were the only ones allowed to witness the transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:1–13). But it is helpful to see the larger pattern the gospel writers give of three groups of four disciples who are apparently not listed by their order of calling, but rather for their level of relationship with Jesus, or some other reason. However, all of these men (with the exception of Judas Iscariot) were carefully chosen as having qualities that could be used – with God's help – in conveying the gospel of the kingdom of God to the whole world.

The Called and the Qualified

On the other hand, a common misconception about the disciples Jesus chose is that they were somehow “spiritual” individuals who were chosen for their “good hearts” or righteousness. This idea is evident in images of the disciples with halos around their heads in paintings showing their calling. The New Testament indicates the reality was very different. Jesus certainly prayed intensely before he chose his twelve key disciples, but it was evidently not that he might choose the most righteous among his followers. Peter, we must remember, openly admitted his apparent unsuitability for a religious calling by telling Jesus “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8). Perhaps the same could have been said by a number of the twelve Jesus enlisted, but in any event the gospel narratives often show the failings of all of the Twelve.

This is why it is often said that when choosing his disciples Jesus did not call the qualified, he qualified the called. Jesus did not select religiously trained individuals who knew the scriptures by heart and could expound them in technical detail. Instead, as we will see, he selected individuals whose formal religious knowledge was probably quite limited, but whose hearts and attitudes meant that they would be open and receptive to what he wanted to teach them.

PART TWO:
MISTAKES MADE

5. AT HIS RIGHT AND LEFT HAND

Understanding the background of who the disciples were, and how they were called by Jesus, enables us to move on to gain a better understanding of them as people. As we saw in the previous chapter of this book, the disciples were not chosen for their great spiritual qualities or righteousness – in fact, the writers of the New Testament clearly make an effort to show that was not the case. Individually, and as a group, the twelve disciples made a great many mistakes during their training with Jesus. Seeing those mistakes clearly can help us not only to understand the human failings of the disciples, but also help us better see the degree of change that was to come over them.

In this section we will consider some of the mistakes the disciples made – not from a judgmental perspective, of course, but in order to learn from their problems and failures and to be encouraged in seeing how the problems were later overcome. The first thing we need to understand is that the gospels show the disciples, of themselves, did not really become better as time went on. Even after three years of following Jesus and receiving his direct training, they were still falling down spiritually in a great many ways.

To make this point as clearly as possible, in this and the following chapters of Part Two we will look at examples of serious mistakes made by the disciples *near the end* of Jesus' ministry – and in one case, even *after* it.

The first case study we will consider is recorded in two of the gospels – an error committed by two of the leading disciples who had been privileged to learn most closely from Jesus:

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said ... “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory” (Mark 10:35–37).

People will go to great lengths to get the best seats in a restaurant, a theater, or at some important public occasion, but James and John

outdid themselves in their asking (apparently with their mother's urging – Matthew 20:20–21) for the seats at the right and left hand of Christ in his coming kingdom.

We should remember that this event took place shortly after Jesus had already promised his apostles that they would all “sit upon thrones” judging the twelve tribes of Israel in the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:28). The request made by James and John was not just for great authority, but to be elevated to the highest positions of all at Christ's right and left hand.

The audacity of these two disciples may seem remarkable in what they asked, but in reality, James and John were not the only disciples enamored by the thought of ruling with power. Mark shows that the other disciples were extremely angry once they realized the two brothers had made this bid for prominence in the group (Matthew 20:24). While the other disciples' reaction may have been one of “righteous indignation,” it is perhaps more likely that they were simply angry at being almost outmaneuvered in regard to who would be the greatest among them.

Yet we should notice that Jesus did not rebuke the disciples regarding their desire for these elevated positions. Rather, he first asked James and John if they were able to “drink the cup” he was going to have to drink – referencing, of course, his coming suffering (Matthew 20:22). Jesus then patiently explained to all the disciples that the greatest among them must be the greatest servant (Matthew 20:25–27) and tried to help them to understand that before any such elevated positions in his kingdom were assigned, he must suffer and die (vs. 28).

After this, Jesus continued on the way to Jerusalem where he knew he would sacrifice his life, but we do not know if the disciples learned the lesson he had attempted to teach them. There is nothing in the gospels that indicates they understood or applied the lesson at that time. We can almost see them jostling with each other to get to be closest to Jesus as he rode, humbly yet triumphantly, into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1–11). But the events that soon took place must surely have brought the lesson back to their memories.

After Jesus' betrayal, when it came to the time of his death on the cross, the only ones who were lifted up at his right and left hand were the two condemned individuals who were crucified on either side of him (Matthew 27:38). We can only wonder if James and John realized the irony of that fact, and if they saw in it the lesson Christ had tried to teach them – that those who get to be elevated on the right and left hand of the Son of God are not the great of the world who rule by the world's power, but those who lose their lives and who symbolically, spiritually, are crucified with him (Galatians 2:19–20).

The lesson is clearly there for us to understand and apply also. The apostle Paul explained this spiritual fact when he wrote that: "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6). We are all given the opportunity to sit with Christ in his kingdom, but we should not focus on who will be closest to his right or left hand – rather, as Paul affirms: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1). The goal is not to obtain the best seat possible, but to serve and sacrifice and to eventually sit together with him.

6. FOLLOWING – AT A SAFE DISTANCE

“Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest ... But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome” (Matthew 26:57–59).

The description of Peter – who had only recently insisted that he would follow Jesus to the death if necessary (John 13:37) – following at a safe distance after Jesus’ arrest is one of the most unflattering stories in the New Testament. When the “chips were down,” Peter did not stick with the one he acknowledged as the Christ; though later, after his repentance and empowering by the Spirit of God, he did, of course, follow Jesus to the end.

But Matthew highlights three specific mistakes Peter made after the arrest of Jesus (not counting his cutting off the ear of the high priest’s servant in the Garden of Gethsemane – John 18:10–11) and each mistake has an application that we can consider regarding our own lives – three ways we too must be careful not to fail in following.

First, we see that although Peter did follow Christ as he was led away, the apostle followed him at a distance. The expression “at a distance” tells its own story – it means Peter was close enough that he was considered to be following Jesus, but not close enough that he would be identified with him.

Next, it is significant that all three of the Synoptic Gospels mention that Peter followed a large crowd of people to the High Priest’s residence where Jesus was interrogated (Matthew 26:47; Mark 14:48; Luke 22:47). Peter was following at such a distance that we are told he was not part of the crowd but *followed* it – he was in a very literal sense following at a safe distance and also weakly following those who were against Jesus as much as he was following Jesus himself.

Finally, notice that when Peter followed Jesus to the high priest's courtyard he then "sat down ... to see the outcome." Once again, Matthew's careful description of the scene speaks volumes regarding Peter's degree of following: Apparently Peter did not press forward to try to be with Jesus even when he had opportunity (John 18:15-17), but held back, waiting to see what would happen.

So Matthew describes three clear failures in Peter's attempt to follow Jesus. The sad end of this scene was also, of course, Peter's threefold denial of Jesus, his hearing the rooster crow three times, and his full realization that his level of "following" his Master was not to death with him as he had promised (Matthew 26:35), but to denial of him.

The lessons for us in the New Testament story of Peter's failures in following may be obvious, but they deserve to be focused upon. We should all ask ourselves if our following Jesus is at a distance. Most obviously, if we are only partially involved in our religious beliefs and practices, if we think of our faith as something we only express at church and not in all aspects of our lives, we too are following Jesus at a distance.

More subtly, if we are more closely associated with the crowd following Jesus than with Jesus himself, we are also not following him closely. And if we wait to see the outcome of things such as our prayers and requests to God before trusting him or totally committing ourselves to him, we are yet again not following him closely. Most importantly, Matthew shows that failure to follow Jesus closely is doomed to eventually lead to denial of him. How we follow Jesus and whether or not we eventually deny him in our lives are closely connected.

"Follow me" was the first recorded command of Jesus to Peter (Matthew 4:19), and it was also the last recorded command of Jesus to that disciple (John 21:22). Sadly, Peter had to learn an important lesson – that saying we are following Jesus and doing so are not the same, and that we can even be following him yet not anywhere closely enough. As John records, Jesus gives the same command to everyone he calls: "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be" (John 12:26). This is the kind of

following Jesus commands and desires – he said nothing about following at a distance, but rather following him so closely as to be where he is. This is a lesson Peter had to learn, and one that we must never forget.

But if the disciples of Jesus were given a command to follow him – and follow him closely – they were also given a promise in that regard. Matthew records that Jesus told the original Twelve:

“Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” (Matthew 19:28)

This promise made to his original followers was also expanded to all who would subsequently follow Christ: “To the one who overcomes, I will grant the right to sit with me on my throne” (Revelation 3:21). Those who overcome, of course, are those who are following Jesus closely, not just following at a safe distance (Revelation 3:1–2).

7. JUDAS: THE NON-LEARNER

When we hear the name Judas, we invariably think of the most notorious man in the Bible: Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples and the eventual betrayer of Jesus. Actually, Judas – the Greek form of the Hebrew name Judah – was an extremely common name in first-century Judea and there are numerous individuals with that name mentioned in the New Testament, with the name itself occurring thirty-six times. There was an otherwise unknown Judas in the genealogy of Jesus (Luke 3:30); Judas, the brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55); Judas the son of James, one of the twelve disciples (Luke 6:16); Judas called Barsabbas, a companion of Paul (Acts 15:22); and a number of others.

However, none of these individuals comes to mind as quickly as Judas Iscariot. His name is synonymous with betrayal; but what can we learn from the fatal error and sin of this man? Sad and distasteful as it may seem to focus on his memory, it is preserved – like everything else in the Scriptures – for our benefit and learning (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

The Names Behind the Name

If we are to learn what the New Testament wants to teach us regarding Judas, we must start with the man's name. The name "Iscariot" is not a second name. The Hebrew *Ish Keriath* (written in Greek as *Iscariotes*) means "Man of Keriath," referring to a city of that name in Judah (Joshua 15:25). This is important because it labels Judas as an outsider, the only one of the twelve who was not from Galilee, but from the area of Judah – a fact which is biblically significant, as we will see.

The name Judas itself is the Greek form (*Ioudas*) of Judah – the name of one of the twelve sons of Jacob and the Israelite tribe descended from him. In New Testament times it was also the name of the southern part of Palestine which was called Judea by the Romans. Because of this background, Judas' name was directly equated with the identity of the inhabitants of Judea – the Jews themselves.

Once we realize the connection between the name Judas and both the patriarch Judah and the Jewish people, we better understand the symbolic nature of Judas' betrayal of Jesus from a biblical perspective. In the Old Testament story of the precocious Joseph, the young son of Jacob who was hated by his other brothers, it was Jacob's son Judah who

convinced his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery for twenty pieces of silver (Genesis 37:27–28). In the Gospels we see the later Judah (Judas) acting out this same role in selling Jesus into the hands of the Jewish religious leaders for thirty pieces of silver. This significance would not have been lost to the earliest Christians who knew this story well as part of their Jewish heritage. And this is especially true as the Old Testament tells us the selling of Joseph was allowed by God to bring good to his people, just as the selling of Jesus was also allowed in order to bring good to God’s people.

Even more fundamentally, as a symbol of the Jewish people themselves, Judas represented those who hated, rejected, and wished to destroy Jesus. This attitude toward Jesus of many of the Jews of his day is the reason why John’s Gospel tells us “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (John 1:11 CSB). Judas’ attitude toward Jesus was representative of the way the Jews themselves saw and unwittingly rejected their own Messiah (Mark 6:1–6; etc.).

Anatomy of a Non-Learner

But if it is clear how Judas became a symbol of the rejection of Jesus, how did that rejection come about in the heart and mind of a man who spent some three years listening to the teaching of the Son of God and seeing that teaching lived out perfectly from day to day? We do not know at what point Judas began to turn against his Teacher, but it is clear that over time his rejection of Jesus – and Jesus’ message – must have grown steadily stronger. The more Judas heard and saw of the truth, the more he must have learned to put it aside and not apply it to himself. The more he did that, the more Judas’ heart was hardened and eventually became a fertile ground for the growth of evil itself. And that is something from which we ourselves can learn.

We tend to not see how Judas’ sin might apply to us personally, because we focus only on his betrayal of Jesus. But the betrayal itself was based on a subtle but long-standing problem of denial and rejection that can apply directly to us. Do we ever put aside a truth when it is given to us? Do we ever conclude that some aspect of the way God teaches us is inconvenient, or something that we decide to deal with later? If and whenever we do not embrace, accept, and act upon any part of God’s way of life, we too can begin to dull our spiritual sensibilities. When that happens, we, like Judas, can eventually become a non-learner – a person

who may hear the words but who is increasingly unlikely to live by them (James 1:23–25).

Eventually, in Judas' case, this gradual process of hardening led him to become what the apostle John called the "son of destruction" (John 17:12 ESV) – a term that interestingly is used only one other time in the New Testament: of the Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:3 ESV). These are extreme cases, of course, but the Bible clearly holds up Judas as an example showing how the disciple must never partially learn – that partial learning becomes non-learning and non-learning can lead eventually to failure and destruction (Hebrews 6:4–8).

On the other hand, whenever we read the story of Judas or hear his name, we can determine that we will never make that same mistake – that with God's help we will wholeheartedly accept and act on truth as it is given to us. That, sadly, was a lesson Judas never learned.

8. THE APOSTLE WHO DIDN'T COME TO DINNER

“He had been invited, of course – not that he needed an invitation! – and we had saved a place for him. But he had not come to dinner for the past week, and it was beginning to be obvious that he would not be coming to dinner that night either. He may just have been busy, of course. Any apostle – and especially one of the chief apostles – must have so many responsibilities. But it was strange, nonetheless. Some were even beginning to wonder if they had offended him, or if fellowship with the Gentile converts is not a pressing issue just now. But surely, it couldn't be, as some have suggested, that Peter who is called Cephas views us as somehow less than equal in the fellowship of Christ ... could it?”

This imaginary conversation could well be the description of what a Gentile believer might have told the apostle Paul regarding how Peter seemed – long after the arrival of the Holy Spirit – to have turned from the Gentile converts he himself had originally welcomed into the faith (Acts 10). In the second chapter of Galatians Paul tells the amazing story:

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face ... For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. (Galatians 2:11–13).

Paul's stand against Peter's hypocrisy in this issue must have been a legendary event in the early church. Paul certainly did not skirt the issue:

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?” (Galatians 2:14)

Fortunately, although he was arguably the most senior apostle, Peter had the humility to admit he was still making mistakes and to accept Paul's reprimand (something worth thinking about in itself). Peter changed his

behavior and began to fellowship again with the Gentile believers. Clearly, he learned a valuable lesson, one which doubtless lies behind the words written in one of his own epistles years later: “Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers...” (1 Peter 2:17).

But this story is given in the Bible for our admonition, not Peter’s. Do we avoid certain people in the faith for any reason? Do we not fully accept other believers because of some difference in doctrine or belief? If the apostle Peter could make this mistake, are we above making it?

We know that we are to “keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching ...” (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14), but that does not apply to believers who are sincerely trying to do God’s will. The book of Acts and the writings of Paul make it abundantly clear that God had shown that Gentile believers were to be fully accepted as brothers and sisters in the faith – even though they may not have had complete doctrinal understanding (Acts 15:28).

This principle also applies directly to us, of course, in dealing with fellow believers of other doctrinal persuasions. We may not agree with each other on things that we consider to be important, but that does not preclude our fellowship and helping one another in the faith. Even though we may understand that principle intellectually, we must all ask ourselves if there is some reason we are not extending friendship and fellowship to those whose understanding is not identical to our own.

PART THREE:
LESSONS LEARNED

9. WHY DO WE DOUBT THOMAS?

“Doubting Thomas” – there is no doubt that most Christians regard him as something of a failure. The disciple who said he would not believe in Christ’s resurrection until he had seen him with his own eyes and touched him with his own hands (and who later got the opportunity to do so, of course), has become synonymous with those who do not believe. Even those of us who believe faith should involve the head as well as the heart have not embraced Thomas as the poster-disciple of reasonable faith.

But why is this – why do we doubt Thomas? Looking at the story – which is found in chapter 20 of the Gospel of John – is instructive:

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:24–29)

Although this account is often cited as an example of unbelief, there is really nothing in it to say that Christ chastised Thomas in any way. We should remember that doubt had marked the response of all the disciples from the very first reports of the resurrection. Although Mary Magdalene, who had gone to the tomb and found it empty, reported this to Peter and John (John 20:2), apparently

John himself did not believe the resurrection had occurred until he saw evidence with his own eyes: “Finally the other disciple [John], who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed” (John 20:8).

More importantly, John tells us that all of the disciples – except Thomas who was not present – were given the opportunity to see Christ, and at that time “he showed them his hands and side” (John 20:19–20). Luke adds further details, and tells us that when Christ appeared to them at that time, the disciples had to be reassured and convinced:

They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do *doubts* rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. (Luke 24:37–40, emphasis added)

So every one of the disciples except Thomas had opportunity not only to see the resurrected Christ, but also to see the marks of his wounds. This helps us to understand Thomas’ specific mention of wanting to see the same things. But we can hardly judge Thomas as a doubter of the resurrection any more than the other disciples who thought they saw a ghost and had to be given the opportunity of visible evidence before accepting the resurrection as fact. When Jesus did appear to Thomas and the others later, he did not chide Thomas as “you of little faith” in the way he had so often rebuked the disciples when he performed miracles during his ministry; he simply gave Thomas the same opportunity to see him that the other apostles had already been given. We should realize that Jesus’ words: “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29) were given for us, not for Thomas.

We should also not forget the importance of seeing as part of the basis of belief for all of the apostles. In his great sermon of Acts 2, Peter himself stressed that the proof of the resurrection was that all the apostles were witnesses – they had seen Christ with their own

eyes (Acts 2:32) – and there is no indication to think any of them would have believed if they had not seen him.

Thomas' reasonable doubt does not appear to have been substantially different from that of the other disciples before they had seen Jesus, and his story actually teaches an important lesson about doubts that are overcome. We should remember that when Thomas did see Christ he *immediately* exclaimed "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Thomas is the only person recorded in the Gospels to make this confession and to actually call Jesus "God." There is a lesson in this for us. Do we react as quickly and with such full commitment when we are given reasons to believe or whenever we see some new truth in God's word that clearly applies to us?

Tradition tells us, if we accept it, that after seeing the resurrected Christ, Thomas' firm belief led him to do extensive and powerful work in preaching the gospel until he suffered a faithful martyrdom. But in any case, the New Testament shows he was a devoted disciple (John 11:16); he was never called "Doubting Thomas" in the early church, and the Scriptures clearly indicate that, along with the other apostles, he will have an honored position in the kingdom of God (Revelation 21:14). Thomas' belief, once he established it, was a full and powerful faith – and there is no reason to doubt that.

10. A LESSON ABOUT LOVE

The story of how the resurrected Jesus reinstated and recommissioned the apostle Peter after his earlier denials of his Master is frequently told, but we do not always notice its significance for us personally.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.” The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.” (John 21:15–17)

It is frequently pointed out that in his first two questions Jesus uses a form of the word *agapé* – godly, unconditional love, but Peter replies with a form of the word *phileó* – meaning only brotherly love or affection. To paraphrase the question Jesus asked and Peter’s answer: “Do you have love for me?” “Yes, I have affection for you.” In his final question (verse 17) Jesus lowers the level of love to ask “Do you have affection for me?” to which Peter again replies “...you know I have affection for you.”

It is possible that by repeating his question three times Jesus was gently reminding Peter of his disciple’s three denials, but it is clear that Peter, in his shame, could not bring himself to say he loved Jesus to such a high level as unconditional godly love, only to a lesser, human degree – to which Jesus finally lowered his question. But while the element of shame may have affected Peter’s answers at that moment in time, we certainly need not “lower our sights” as to the level of love it is possible to develop and to direct to God and to others.

A great many scriptures in the New Testament show that it is the unconditional *agapé* love that we are to have toward God and others. In two extremely poignant scriptures, Peter himself tells us that we must move beyond human love:

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love [*phileó*] of the brethren, love [*agapé*] one another earnestly from the heart. (1 Peter 1:22 ESV)

add ... to godliness, mutual affection [*phileó*]; and to mutual affection, love [*agapé*]. (2 Peter 1:7)

It is perhaps significant that Peter included this thought in both his epistles – that we must move beyond human love to a godly love that is both deeper and higher than human affection. Peter had learned the hard way that human love – even the love of closest friends – is not enough to fulfill God's law of love. It is a lesson that Peter had clearly grasped, and one that we must also learn.

11. CHANGED PRIORITIES

One of the first and most important lessons we can learn from what the New Testament tells us about the twelve disciples Jesus chose and trained is that of priorities. It would be easy to presume that those who were directly called by Jesus and who saw his ongoing daily example would have quickly learned to have the same priorities he did – the same goals in any given situation. Yet throughout Christ’s ministry, and even after his resurrection, we see the disciples all too often had misplaced or simply wrong priorities.

To see this, we need only look at the account of Jesus’ ascension. In his last moments with the disciples, and in their last recorded words to Jesus, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). This was over a month after the resurrection, and the disciples had been given special in-depth teaching during that time. Yet they still had misplaced priorities – thinking that the most important goals were those of a political messiah who would free Judea from the Romans and give the Jews an independent physical kingdom again!

As he so often had done, Jesus patiently corrected the disciples at that time and straightened their priorities out (Acts 1:7–9). But this had been an ongoing problem – Jesus had to continually guide the disciples into right priorities throughout his ministry. It is not coincidental that in his Sermon on the Mount Christ instructed his followers not just to seek the kingdom of God, but to “seek *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33 ESV, emphasis added).

Noting Jesus’ frequent stress on priorities when speaking to those who would be his disciples is instructive – as when we read that a man he called to follow him said “Lord, first let me go and bury my father” and Jesus replied “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:59–60). The Gospel of Mark records an important interaction between Jesus and the twelve disciples in exactly this matter of priorities:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!” Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” (Mark 1:35–38)

Jesus declared that his purpose was to preach, but notice that his priorities were to pray, then preach – to seek God first, then to do God’s work. Notice, too, that Simon Peter and the other disciples had not learned this lesson yet. We are told “when they found him, they exclaimed: ‘Everyone is looking for you!’” (vs. 37), meaning the crowds of people Jesus was teaching. This statement was more than simply letting Jesus know the disciples had been trying to find him. It is as if they were saying “Where have you been? – There is ministry work to be done!”

Interestingly, after the Spirit of God was poured out at Pentecost this situation changed and the disciples’ priorities were corrected. Acts tells us that when the Twelve became overwhelmed with the many everyday responsibilities of the Church, they appointed seven individuals as deacons to help with the physical work. Of themselves the apostles said “We ... will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word”(Acts 6: 3–4). These were exactly the priorities – and in the correct order – that Jesus had lived during his ministry, and they were now the priorities of his disciples.

It is important to see that the disciples had eventually learned a vital lesson. They had been entrusted with the most important job in the world, but they now realized that their work must be based on their relationship with God. Jesus had sought the Father as his first priority before attempting to do the work he had been given to do, and now his disciples were successfully following his example. Today, this is a lesson that every pastor, preacher, missionary, and ultimately every Christian must fully understand – that even the work we do for God must be made a second priority to our walk with God.

A wonderful example of this truth is found in the experience of Evangelist Billy Graham who, despite the incredible spiritual achievements accomplished through his work, late in life admitted to several regrets – one of which was that he felt he had sometimes prioritized his work before his spiritual life. Looking back on his life and ministry he wrote “I would do many things differently. For one thing, I would speak less and study more.” He elaborated on this:

I would also spend more time in spiritual nurture, seeking to grow closer to God so I could become more like Christ. I would spend more time in prayer, not just for myself but for others. I would spend more time studying the Bible and meditating on its truth, not only for sermon preparation but to apply its message to my life. (From the autobiography of Billy Graham, *Just As I Am*)

Billy Graham learned, just as the twelve disciples eventually learned, that we must sometimes change our priorities, no matter how right they may seem. We too must learn that seeking God was always Jesus’ first priority – and must be ours, also.

12. AGENTS OF CHANGE

We began this book by commenting on the fact that the word disciple means “learner,” and that word certainly fits the twelve disciples throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry. By definition, “learner” usually implies someone whose abilities are only developing – and certainly the opposite of someone who is a leader. But as we know from the New Testament, the disciples were suddenly and dramatically changed into courageous and dynamic leaders after Christ’s ascension, and it is important that we realize the reasons for that change.

The book of Acts shows us an interesting aspect of the change that came over the disciples. Although they had received some three years of training from Jesus himself, they were not theologically educated according to normal expectations. Acts tells us that the Jewish religious leaders were perplexed by the ability of these men to boldly teach, despite their seeming ignorance: “When they observed the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed and recognized that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13 CSB). It was clear to the Jewish leaders that although the disciples had no normal preparation for theological discourse, they were nevertheless now equipped to teach – because “they had been with Jesus.” The influence of Jesus had affected them in three ways:

The Resurrection of Jesus

After Jesus’ arrest, the confused and fearful disciples scattered, seeking to hide and probably to hide their shame. The apostle John tells us that this was primarily a result of one fact: “They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead” (John 20:9). Experiencing and coming to understand the resurrection was the first great agent of change in the lives of the apostles.

Whatever the degree of their understanding of Jesus' identity had been during his ministry, the effect of seeing him alive after his death must have been a totally shocking, but also mind-opening experience for the disciples. Although they were able to psychologically adjust to the situation, they were doubtless deeply affected – and changed – by it. Understanding and seeing first-hand the reality of the resurrection gave the disciples a new and clearer perception of Jesus as not only a great teacher, prophet, and healer, as well as the promised Messiah, but also as the Son of God. The fact of the resurrection also immensely strengthened the apostles' faith and confidence to do what Jesus commanded.

The Great Commission

After his resurrection, Jesus' guidance of his disciples changed from "Come and see" (John 1:39) to the message of Mark 16:15 "Go and show" – from training his disciples to sending them out to fulfill the commission he had given them. That commission is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20). Jesus had earlier taught his disciples to baptize and teach (John 4:2; Luke 9:1–2), but not specifically to make disciples.

The importance of this new command (placed first of the three) is heightened by the fact that in the Greek in which it is written, "make disciples" is the only direct command – "baptize" and "teach" are indirect commands which do not have the same emphasis. The primary thrust of the Great Commission as recorded in Matthew is the *making of disciples* which was to be done *by* baptizing and teaching them, and that is what Acts repeatedly shows us: the apostles making increasing numbers of disciples (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; etc.).

The Great Commission changed the focus of the apostles in helping them to look outward and forward. And they were themselves changed in many ways by the commission they were given – not least in that even men who had no formal education or

literary background were inspired to write to the disciples they had made, and many of the books of the New Testament were written as a direct result.

The Holy Spirit

The most important agent of change that affected the apostles, however, was clearly the Holy Spirit. While Matthew's record of the Great Commission tells us only that Jesus promised his disciples "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20), Luke's Gospel makes it clear that Jesus' presence would be through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:48–49). While Matthew's Great Commission includes the command to "*go* make disciples," the only command stressed in Luke is "*stay* in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49).

In Acts, Luke repeatedly emphasizes the newfound boldness of the apostles as witnesses of Jesus' resurrection and messianic identity – even in the face of the harshest opposition. Not only were the Jewish leaders who arrested Peter and John astonished by their boldness (Acts 4:13), but also Acts stresses that the disciples prayed to speak the word of God "with boldness" despite all opposition (Acts 4:31). Later, Acts tells us that Paul, too, taught "with all boldness" while he was under arrest (Acts 28:31). Luke had made clear in his Gospel that the apostles were not naturally bold or courageous, but in Acts he shows that the Spirit of God had made them so (Acts 4:8) – to a degree that now was evident to even their enemies.

These, then, were the agents of change in the lives of Jesus' disciples. And it was through them that the disciples themselves became agents of change in the lives of countless other people. Our experience today need not be any different. Through those same agents of change – believing the resurrection, accepting the Great Commission, and receiving the Holy Spirit – we too can be greatly changed and help others to change in turn.

PART FOUR:
FROM LEARNERS TO LEADERS

13. CHANGED FOR GOOD

If we read the New Testament carefully, we see the changes that took place in the lives of the disciples were nothing less than amazing. Individuals who before had been argumentative, selfish, and largely blind to spiritual realities, were now radically different.

Comparing the descriptions of the disciples' actions recorded in the Gospels with those of the same individuals in the book of Acts is especially instructive. As a physician, Luke was a careful observer of people and some of his detailed accounts in Acts show just how much the disciples changed after they received the Holy Spirit.

For example, the Gospels record how Jesus predicted he would be persecuted and that “the time is coming – indeed it is here now – when you will be scattered, each one going his own way, leaving me alone” (John 16:31–32 NLT). “Scattered” is a charitable word to use of the situation in which the disciples deserted Jesus completely. But after the disciples were changed, even when they themselves received persecution, they were not scattered.

Compare the startling difference between what we are told in the Gospels: “Then they all deserted him and ran away” (Mark 14:50 CSB), with what we are told in Acts: “On that day a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered” (Acts 8:1 CSB). While they had been the only ones who had fled before, now they were the only ones who did not flee! In fact, Acts specifically mentions the disciples' newfound boldness seven times (Acts 4:31; 9:28; etc.).

The changes that took place in the disciples affected the whole group, but they are most easily seen in what Acts tells us about the three leading apostles: Peter, James, and John.

Peter

The apostle Peter certainly showed an undeniable lack of faith on more than one occasion. We need only to remember the time that Jesus and the disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee and a great

storm came up, and how Peter and the rest of the disciples frantically woke Jesus – who was sleeping peacefully in the ship – to tell him they were all going to drown (Matthew 8:23-25). But if we fast forward into the book of Acts, after the apostles received the Spirit of God (Acts 2), we see an interesting change.

Acts 12 tells us that after killing the apostle James, King Herod had Peter arrested during the Passover season – the anniversary of the death of Jesus – and the awful fate of his Master, and now James, must have been very present in Peter’s mind. But notice the details of how Acts describes Peter’s rescue from prison:

The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists. (Acts 12:6–7)

Given Peter’s earlier lack of faith and propensity to “crumble,” along with the awful circumstances of his imprisonment and the fate that likely awaited him, we would presume that Peter was probably lying sleepless in his cell – worrying over his situation and his possible martyrdom. But Peter was sleeping. Even after the rescuing angel “turned the light on” in his cell, Peter continued to sleep. Acts tells us that the angel had to poke him in the side (the Greek word *pataxas* means “striking” – not a gentle nudge) to wake him, and Peter had apparently been sleeping so soundly and deeply that even when he was awakened, he was still unsure of what was happening (Acts 12:9).

We can hardly compare the Peter who woke the sleeping Jesus in terror in the storm at sea with this Peter who faced almost certain death and yet now slept as peacefully as his Master had done.

James

We may often remember Peter’s promise never to desert Jesus (Matthew 26:33), only to desert him a few hours later (Mark 14:50),

but Peter was not the only disciple who “talked big.” When Jesus said to James and his brother John “Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of suffering I am about to drink?” their reply was quick: “Oh yes,” they replied, “we are able!” (Matthew 20:22 NLT). But when Jesus was arrested, James ran away like all the others. So James – one of the two “sons of thunder” – was all noise until he was changed by the Holy Spirit. James then became a fearless servant of his Master and now had the resolve and courage to honor his earlier promise – even to death by Herod’s executioners.

John

In the same way, John – the other son of thunder – who had wanted to bring lightning down from heaven on those who displeased him (Luke 9:54), was changed dramatically. The same John who gave vent to the strongest feelings of anger and retaliation became the disciple of love. As he himself would later write (using the word love six times in a single verse): “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7–8 ESV).

These examples show the startling change for good that was worked by the Spirit of God in the lives of the leading disciples. But although we have more information about them than the others, it is clear that all the disciples and many others were also changed in important ways. Among them were several women, including Jesus’ mother, Mary, and his brothers, who were changed dramatically too – from being sure that Jesus was mad (Mark 3:21) to being convinced that he was the Messiah (Acts 1:14). The apostle Paul is a perfect later example of this same kind of change – being transformed from one of the worst persecutors of Christianity to one of its most important proponents. And, as he himself wrote, we too should “Let the Spirit change your way of thinking and make you into a new person” (Ephesians 4:23–24 CEV). To be changed for good is the goal of every follower of Jesus – from the earliest disciples, to those of us today.

14. THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

When we think of the many changes the Spirit of God brings about in the lives of Christians, we tend to think of the apostle Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23). These spiritual qualities were certainly manifested in the lives of the apostles and other disciples after they received the Holy Spirit, but these fruits are primarily expressions of personal righteousness rather than gifts the Spirit gives to enable the work of God. To see gifts of the latter type we must turn first to the Old Testament and the book of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the LORD will rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and power, the Spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD. (Isaiah 11:1-2 ISV)

These qualities are sometimes called the "seven gifts of the Spirit," but they are really three pairs of related gifts – the first pair (wisdom and understanding) being intellectual, the second (counsel and power) practical, and the third (knowledge and fear of the LORD) spiritual in the narrower sense of one's relationship with God. The passage in Isaiah is speaking primarily of the six qualities being bestowed on the promised Messiah, but these are gifts the Scriptures also show being bestowed on other servants of God. They were certainly manifested in the ministry of the apostles after the Holy Spirit was given, and it is noteworthy that the expression Isaiah uses – that the gifts would "rest upon" the Messiah – is exactly the idea we are given of the Spirit coming to rest on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:3).

In fact, the gospel accounts never show the twelve disciples exhibiting the qualities mentioned in Isaiah 11 to any real degree, but after the giving of the Spirit Acts shows the apostles clearly

manifesting all of them – and specifically in relation to the Holy Spirit. Consider just a few examples:

Wisdom:

“Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3).

“But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke” (Acts 6:10).

Power:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

“With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:33).

Fear of God:

“Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:31).

“When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor” (Acts 19:17).

Isaiah’s description of the Spirit-guided servant of God goes on to mention other aspects that apply mainly to the Messiah who would come, but some aspects were just as true of the apostles, also. For example, Isaiah’s words that “He will delight in the fear of the LORD” (Isaiah 11:3) find numerous echoes in the book of Acts (“And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” Acts

13:52; etc.). We can also see a clear expression of the promise “He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears” (Isaiah 11:3), in the description of Peter’s judgment of the deceitful Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) and elsewhere in Acts.

But it is in Isaiah’s listing of the six central qualities that would be given to the Messiah that we see continued connections with the Spirit’s work through the apostles. Men who hardly evidenced these qualities at all before they received the Holy Spirit now exhibited them continually, and there is an important lesson in this fact for us today.

Although, as individual believers, we usually concentrate on Paul’s list of the fruits of the Spirit and may actively pray for their manifestation in our lives, we can learn from the New Testament disciples that the six qualities of the Spirit Isaiah shows would rest upon the Messiah can – and should – rest on every servant of God. We too can pray for these gifts of the Spirit, and it is perhaps to the extent that we do that they will be evident in the individual ministries God gives us to do in our own lives.

15. THE UNITY OF PRAYER

If we were to choose one word that would best characterize the attitudes and behavior of the twelve disciples during the ministry of Jesus, perhaps the last word that we would choose would be “unity.” It is all too often *disunity* among them that we see in the New Testament accounts – as when we read in Luke that “An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest” (Luke 9:46) or when Mark tells us that the two sons of Zebedee asked Jesus to be first in the kingdom and “When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John” (Mark 10:41).

Apparently, these were not isolated events. Even on the night of the Last Supper we read that directly after Jesus had warned the disciples he was going to be betrayed “A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest” (Luke 22:24). So, disunity stoked by competition and rivalry seems to have often been the everyday state of affairs among the twelve disciples.

Yet, despite this background, the book of Acts tells us that after the resurrection of Jesus – and even before the arrival of the Holy Spirit – “They all were continually united in prayer, along with the women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” (Acts 1:14 CSB). Jesus had not told the disciples to pray till the Spirit arrived – he had promised it would be sent and simply told them to wait for it. Their prayer doubtless included praise and thanksgiving, but perhaps something deeper was involved. We are told that Saul, who became the apostle Paul, prayed while he waited in blindness till his sight was restored, and there was probably some serious soul-searching involved in both cases. Saul had sinfully persecuted the church, of course, and the eleven remaining disciples had made many mistakes – not least deserting Jesus in his time of need. In both cases – that of Saul as well as the disciples – there was much to repent of and pray about before the Holy Spirit was given.

But Acts shows us that there was another aspect to the disciples' prayer – that as they waited in Jerusalem they were *united* in prayer. It is only when we remember the *disunity* of the disciples that had been the norm throughout Jesus' ministry that we realize how startling and significant their sudden unity was. And we must realize that Luke's words do not mean the disciples were simply praying together – but that they were truly united as one through their prayer. The word Luke used that is translated “united” in our Bibles is the Greek word *homothumadon* which means “with one mind.” It denotes complete harmony of views and feelings and signifies that there were no longer conflicting attitudes, divided interests, ambitions, or purposes.

On the evening of his betrayal, in his so-called High Priestly prayer, Jesus prayed for his disciples “that all of them may be one” (John 17:21), but we cannot presume that unity was somehow miraculously imposed on the disciples even before they received the Holy Spirit. Instead, we must remember that prayer unites us – forces us to remember that just as we address God as our Father, so every one of his people is our brother or sister. The act of prayer, if done deeply and sincerely, helps us not only to see and repent of our sins, but also to be willing to forgive others and to pray for them. This is clearly reflected in the words of the apostle James: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other” (James 5:16), which apply to more than simply matters of healing. So as they waited in Jerusalem, the disciples were doubtless united in prayer simply because they were praying – and praying unites us.

There is certainly a lesson in this for us. If we are upset with others or finding it hard to forgive them, we need to pray and to pray especially for those with whom we have been disunited (Matthew 5:44; etc.). When we do that we no longer feel anger, judgment, competition, or rivalry, but begin to be truly united with them.

That is what the apostle Paul (who knew a great deal about unity and disunity) meant when he wrote “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ... there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and

thought” (1 Corinthians 1:10), and “make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind” (Philippians 2:2). In a different context, Paul also refers to the very way we can do this: “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests ... and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people” (Ephesians 6:18) – prayer leads to unity.

It was as the waiting disciples began to pray earnestly after the resurrection – probably more so than they ever had – that they doubtless prayed for forgiveness for their rivalries and competition, that they began to pray for each other, and that as they did, they became truly united. We, like them, can learn that prayer unites us in a way that nothing else can.

16. TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

What became of the twelve apostles? Legends abound telling us that in fulfillment of Jesus' command to preach the gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:18–20), the apostles spread out to far-flung areas of the globe carrying the word with them. James the Elder, for example, is said to have carried the gospel to Spain, Matthew to Ethiopia, Bartholomew to Armenia, and Thomas as far as India.

In reality, however, apart from Judas – who we are told ended his own life – we do not know what happened to the individual disciples. Jesus may have hinted at how Peter's and John's lives would end (John 21:21–22), but not when or where. The legends that surround them and the other apostles are often untrustworthy, as many come from later times and a number of them contradict each other.

What we do know of the original apostles is that as a group they spread Christianity from Jerusalem to Damascus, to Antioch, to Asia Minor, to Cyprus, to Greece, and finally to Rome. The New Testament tells us this much. But we should understand both that travel beyond this central area of the ancient world was difficult, and that twelve individuals could only accomplish so much. Clearly, the apostles did not reach the whole world – even the whole known world of that time – as Christ had explicitly said that the end of the age would come after that occurred (Matthew 24:14). Yet history shows us that Christianity did quickly spread to Egypt, Mesopotamia, and other areas – primarily as a result of the individuals the apostles taught.

We should not forget that the exact wording of the Great Commission Jesus gave to the apostles after his resurrection was to “go and make *disciples* of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), meaning that just as he had chosen and trained disciples and sent them out, so should they do in turn. It was in this way, of course, that Jesus' teachings began to spread rapidly and widely, and that Christianity became established.

A Double Commission

As Christianity spread, it distinguished itself from the other religions of the ancient world in a unique manner – its double commission. Many believers today are not as aware of that two-fold calling as we should be, and this is a final and important lesson we can learn from the twelve disciples as a group.

We know that during his earthly ministry, Jesus went about “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:23). Likewise, when he sent out his disciples with their initial commission “he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (Luke 9:2). In fact, the Gospel of Matthew focuses on this important aspect of the disciples’ double commission by comparing what Jesus did with the mission he gave to the disciples (Matthew 9:35–10:8).

Matthew shows that Jesus preached the gospel and healed the sick (9:35), seeing the need of the people who were like sheep without a shepherd (9:36) and in need of laborers to be “sent out” by God to help them (9:38). Matthew then skillfully reverses the items in this list by showing in reverse order that the disciples were sent out (10:5) to be “shepherds” to the lost sheep of Israel (10:6) and to preach and heal (10:7–8). He inserts the list of the twelve disciples’ names at the center – the focal point – of the story of what Jesus did and what the disciples were called to do (10:2–4), showing the responsibility of these individuals for ministering to the spiritual and physical needs of the world just as Jesus had done.

But Christians today often read the so-called “Great Commission” Jesus gave after his resurrection as a limiting of his original commands to his disciples. When Jesus told his disciples “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), they see an apparent focus on preaching the gospel which they presume replaced the earlier double commission.

In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus did not provide an example for his disciples, train them, and commission them to do two things – only later to reduce them to one. As we saw above, Jesus told the apostles after his resurrection “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), showing he intended them to replicate the training and priorities he had given them.

And so, of course, we see that the early church not only preached the gospel fearlessly (Acts 2:14–41; etc.), but also continued its commitment to healing and helping those in need (Acts 3:1–3; 2:43–45; etc.). This is summarized in Acts’ statement that “All the believers were one in heart and mind ... they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them” (Acts 4:32–34).

We see exactly the same double commission being carried out in the way the apostle Paul later reminded the elders of Ephesus how he “went about preaching the kingdom” (Acts 20:25) and also that he had shown them “that it is necessary to help the weak by laboring ... and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, because he said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35). For Paul, like Peter, and the whole early Christian church, preaching the gospel and helping those in need were inseparable aspects of the commission they had been given.

Sadly, today, many Christian groups stress only witnessing to the world, and many emphasize only helping those in need. However, the twelve disciples left us an abiding lesson that if we are to truly follow in Jesus’ and their footsteps – and continue their work to the ends of the earth – we must help to both carry the word and to help those in need along the way.

APPENDIX: THE DISCIPLES IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

Most readers of the New Testament are aware that each of the four gospels gives a portrait of Jesus from a different angle: Matthew shows the Messiah as King, Mark shows him as Servant, Luke shows his humanity as the Son of Man, and John shows his divinity as the Son of God. But few realize that each of the four gospels also shows the disciples in a very different light, from a different perspective.

Mark

Beginning with Mark – which was probably the earliest of the four gospels to be written – we find that Mark's portrayal of the disciples is a divided one. On the one hand, he identifies them as Jesus' true family (3:20–35) and shows them as actively sharing in Jesus' ministry (6:7–13, 30–44; 8:1–10). On the other hand, the disciples are frequently characterized as having neither faith nor understanding. For example, in 4:35–41; 6:45–52; and 8:14–21, Mark gives a cycle of three related boat scenes in which the disciples' lack of faith is portrayed. Even by the final scene, the disciples still do not really grasp who Jesus is (8:17, 21).

Significantly, the disciples do not particularly progress in their faith and understanding as Mark's narrative moves toward its climax – in fact, their lack of understanding (1:1–8:26) seems to increase, which leads them to misunderstanding (8:27–10:45), and finally to deserting and denying Jesus (14:50, 71). Also, the disciples consistently misunderstand Jesus' message of the kingdom. Rather, they are continually shown to be preoccupied with their own status within their own idea of the coming kingdom (8:27–10:45). In fact, Mark seems to contrast the disciples with individuals like the blind man Bartimaeus and the woman who anointed Jesus who are shown as having true faith and understanding.

This negative portrayal is clearly not accidental. In Mark's Gospel, the verb *dialogizomai* ("to argue") is used to describe the unbelieving rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders (2:6, 8; 11:31); and Mark 9:33 uses the same verb to describe the disciples' unbelieving failure to understand Jesus' predictions of his coming rejection, suffering, and death. Mark even frequently uses the expression "hardness of heart" of the disciples – which he also uses of the Jewish religious leaders (3:5; 10:5 ESV) – in order to indicate the disciples' lack of faith (6:52; 8:17–18; etc.). This negative portrayal of the disciples continues to the end of the Gospel: "Jesus appeared to the Eleven and rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen him after he had risen" (16:14 BSB).

What is remarkable about this candid description is that Mark's Gospel ends before showing how the disciples were transformed after the coming of the Holy Spirit. His portrait of the disciples can thus be seen to be at least partly a teaching one, showing how we should *not* respond to Christ and his message. The fact that this Gospel was probably the earliest written – and that Peter is believed to have been one of Mark's main sources – doubtless affected its partly negative portrait, as the earlier failures of the disciples were understandably still very clear in their own minds.

Matthew

Matthew's portrayal of the twelve disciples is one of many indicators that his Gospel was written after that of Mark. Matthew seems to attempt, at least partially, to give a more positive portrayal of the disciples than Mark does. For example, the disciples in Matthew are not shown as being ignorant of Jesus' identity (something stressed repeatedly in Mark). They are shown to have some spiritual understanding (13:10–11; etc.) but are said to be men "of little faith" throughout Matthew's Gospel (6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 28:17). That this is repeated so many times indicates there was a conscious desire on Matthew's part to stress the disciples' lack of faith rather than their hardness of heart.

An interesting example of this more positive portrayal can be seen in the story of Jesus walking to the disciples' boat on the Sea of Galilee. Matthew (14:22–33) follows the description given by Mark (6:45–52) almost exactly in most details. The only differences between the accounts are significant ones: Matthew omits Mark's comment "They were astounded. They had not understood ... their hearts were hardened," and includes instead a more positive description of Peter's attempt to walk to Jesus on the sea, followed by Jesus' mild exclamation "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

The disciples' lack of faith is not only stressed often in Matthew, but also some of his stories are given primarily (if not entirely) to show this – as in the case of the story of the disciples' failure to cast the demon out of a young boy (17:19). The portrayal continues all the way down to the final episode in the Gospel of Matthew (28:16–20) where the disciples are portrayed – after the resurrection – as still doubting and being of little faith.

Despite their lack of faith, Matthew stresses the commissioning of the disciples in chapter ten and from that point they are shown as a major focus of Christ's ministry. Before this the disciples are only mentioned nine times. From chapter ten onwards they are mentioned over sixty times.

While Mark uses the same negative terms both of the disciples and the hard-hearted Jewish religious leaders and people, Matthew uses different terms to distinguish the disciples from the people. Matthew also shows the disciples understanding more than the people (13:10–11; etc.) and shows that the disciples were much more committed to following Christ than others were (19:27) – something not stressed at all in Mark.

In contrast to Mark's frequent comments about Peter, Matthew often portrays the disciples as a collective group. The disciples are portrayed as having a more important role in Matthew's Gospel, which shows them being called in Galilee of the nations (Isaiah 9:1) at its beginning (4:12–22) and being sent out from Galilee to all the nations at its end (28:1–20).

Luke

The Gospel of Luke tells the story of the disciples in considerably greater detail than Mark and Matthew do, and his account is augmented, of course, by a great deal of additional information in the book of Acts – making a much fuller and more complete portrait of the disciples possible.

For example, in the account of Jesus calling some of his disciples from their fishing nets, while Mark and Matthew sketch the story briefly (Mark 1:16–20; Matthew 4:18–22), Luke’s version (Luke 5:1–11) is over twice as long and includes a great many details about the disciples not found in the other gospels.

Luke’s portrayal of the twelve disciples is overall a positive one and by presenting them in more detail in his Gospel than Matthew and Mark do, Luke is able to more fully redeem their “image.” The apostles are then even more positively depicted in Acts. There, they are shown as prayerful, bold, guided by the Holy Spirit, and frequently performing miracles.

Another important aspect of Luke’s Gospel is that the disciples are not shown as representing a closed group. Luke stresses the roles of many of Jesus’ other disciples. For example, the Galilean women followers are more actively involved in Jesus’ work in Luke’s account (8:1–3) than in Matthew or Mark. The seventy disciples sent out by Jesus are emphasized (10:1–12), as are Mary and Martha of Bethany (10:38–42) and the tax collector Zacchaeus in Jericho (19:1–10). For Luke, although the twelve disciples are important, discipleship is more clearly open to everyone who chooses to follow Christ. Luke also adds some twenty unique parables not found in the other gospels and when we look at the themes and messages of these extra parables, we see he is particularly interested in recording teachings that show what disciples should understand and how they should act.

In contrast to Mark, and even more so than Matthew, Luke improves the portrayal of Jesus’ core disciples: they have more understanding than in Mark, and their frequent lack of faith is not

stressed as it is in Matthew. Overall, the disciples are shown as being positive role models for believers.

John

John's Gospel tells us very little about most of the twelve disciples. There is no list giving the names of the Twelve in his Gospel; it does not mention them till a third way through (6:67); and it does not even mention a number of them by name. What John does say about the disciples is mainly in the form of detailed stories about the two leaders – Peter and John. John gives us:

1) A de-emphasized portrayal of Peter. Three scenes in John's Gospel – the foot-washing (13:2–11), the prediction of the denial (13:33–38), and Peter cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant (18:8–11), all portray Peter as resisting the idea that Jesus would suffer or sacrifice his life. In fact, wherever the Synoptic Gospels seem to portray Peter favorably, John seems to show a more restrained picture. The Synoptics read as though Peter was the first called to follow Jesus (Mark 1:16); and later, as though Peter was the first to declare that Jesus was the Messiah (Mark 8:29). In John 1:40–41, however, Peter is only the third disciple to follow Jesus, and is called by his brother Andrew, who tells Peter that Jesus is the Messiah.

2) A de-emphasized portrayal of the apostle John himself. John is never mentioned by name in the fourth Gospel, only as the “other disciple” (18:16; etc.) and “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (13:23; etc.). Although he was obviously one of the leading disciples (especially after the death of James), and he is featured in many key sections of the narrative, John's identity is carefully glossed over. While all the Gospels were written anonymously, the other Gospels at least mention their authors by name when they appear in their narratives. John keeps himself completely in the background.

So, by its portrayal of both Peter and John himself, John's Gospel specifically deemphasizes the two remaining "leading" apostles. This could possibly be because by the time it was written Peter was dead and beginning to be unduly venerated, and because John did not want the same excessive focus on himself.

On the other hand, John's Gospel – more than any other – emphasizes the importance of other disciples and especially female disciples. John uses stories of three women in particular to show them as important and effective disciples. In all three stories a woman is shown carrying an announcement: The Samaritan woman (4:4–42) carries the announcement of Jesus' proximity to her village; Martha of Bethany (11:17–28) carries the news of Jesus' arrival to Mary and the mourners in her home; Mary Magdalen (20:1–18) carries the announcement about Jesus' resurrection to the disciples. Interestingly, John does not describe any of these women in relationship to men as was customary in that society (and seen elsewhere in the New Testament) – in fact, John does the opposite by identifying the husbands of the Samaritan women in relation to her, and Lazarus by his relationship to Martha and Mary.

Four Portraits, Four Views

So, just as each of the four gospels presents a different perspective on the life of Jesus, each also presents a different perspective on the characters and actions of the disciples – ranging from the somewhat cautionary portrayal given by Mark through the more positive image given by Matthew and Luke and the humbly deemphasizing portrayal provided by John. By understanding these different perspectives and carefully putting them together, we can find much with which we might identify with the disciples in their human weaknesses and failings, but also much by which we might be inspired by their well-meaning intentions, dedication, and love of their Lord.

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