

THE DISCIPLES – AN INTRODUCTION

One of the choruses many of us learned when we were children was ...

There were twelve disciples Jesus called to help Him:
Simon Peter, Andrew, James, his brother John;
Philip, Thomas, Matthew, James, the son of Alphaeus,
Thaddeus, Simon, Judas, and Bartholomew.
He has called us, too. He has called us, too.
We are His disciples, I am one and you!
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The twelve disciples were a fascinating group of individuals. Let's turn to Lk. 6 ¹² And it came to pass in those days, that he [*Jesus*] went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. ¹³ And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles; ¹⁴ Simon, (whom he also named Peter,) and Andrew his brother, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew, ¹⁵ Matthew and Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called Zelotes, ¹⁶ And Judas the brother of James, and Judas Iscariot, which also was the traitor.

Every person is different, - there are no two people the same. A husband and wife could be married for sixty years ... and they are still different. And it is one of the most interesting pursuits, to study and watch other people. So, when we look at the characters in Scripture, they are *real* people. They are not fantasy or 'made up'. They are true and genuine ... and they were perfectly ordinary, - just like us. Yet, God took and did the most amazing work through them.

Jesus could have chosen more capable and accomplished men. It could have been of advantage to have chosen a Sadducee, or a young rabbi starting out, or a priest from the temple, or maybe a member of the Sanhedrin ... But no, those whom He *did* call were not orators or theologians. Neither were they particularly articulate. If you would have seen them in the street you would hardly have given them a second glance. They were prone to making mistakes, saying the wrong thing, having the wrong attitudes, having lapses of faith which followed with failure and disappointment. On one occasion Jesus summed them up, [Lk. 24:25](#) O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken.

Politically, they were also quite a ‘mish-mash’. One of them had belonged to a ‘freedom’/terrorist organisation, - the Zealots, - who sought to overthrow the Romans by anarchy and rebellion. Another one of them had, - as it were, - ‘sold his soul’ to the Romans for, as a tax-collector, he was virtually in collusion with them. He would have been considered by the Zealot as a traitor ... and yet Jesus had these two types of people, - politically diametrically opposed, - as two of His twelve disciples.

Four of them were fishermen, and friends all their lives. They would have been ‘hanging around’ together, - usually where you would have seen one, you would have seen all four. They understood each other. They had the same interests. They knew one another so well they knew what the other was thinking ... even before they thought it! It would be very easy to see how they would have kept themselves as a ‘wee clique’.

The remaining half-dozen were made up out of very different types of people taken from a very ordinary society ... They were mostly all from the same region of Galilee. And, of course, there was Judas Iscariot ... He ‘fits the bill’ of a ‘loner’. I could imagine trying to have a conversation with him, but it would not have been easy. He would have been looking you straight in the eye and it would have been difficult figuring out what he was thinking. I don’t think you would ever *really* have gotten to know him.

Nevertheless, Jesus chose them and He came to make out of His disciples the new and true spiritual leadership of Israel. Through those men the New Covenant Jeremiah prophesied would be preached and introduced and instigated, [Jer. 31:31](#) Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah ... [33](#) ... After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. [34](#) ... for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

The disciples would preach the new covenant Gospel that would bring the people of Israel salvation not by trying to adhere to the law but by grace through faith in Christ ... and the nation would be turned again to God. God would even go further for the same Gospel would, - through the Jews, - be brought to and preached throughout the Gentile nations also. Ultimately, the Gospel they would preach would break down the middle wall of partition, and both Jew and Gentile would be reconciled through Christ (Eph. 2:14ff.).

And to achieve His purposes, He did not choose the religious elite in Jerusalem ... but the twelve ordinary men. ... We shall study them each individually, but the main point is how *ordinary* each of these disciples actually was. Despite all their faults and flaws, after Jesus returned to glory (Acts 1) their ministry made such an impact that it continues two thousand years later. ... *Ordinary* people became the means by which the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ was carried to all ends of the earth.

How long were the disciples in the company of Jesus? ... An excellent book on the disciples is *The Training of the Twelve*, written by a Free Church minister born near Perth, Rev. Alexander Bruce (1831-1899). He pointed out that by the time Jesus had called the twelve disciples, He was already half-ways through His earthly ministry. ... Matthew records the calling in 10:1-4 ... Mark in 3:16-19 ... Lk. 6:13-16 ... and Acts 1:13.

Jesus had, of course, *many* disciples for at the beginning He was a widely-acknowledged *phenomenon*. You can see this in Jn. 2 ²³ Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. ²⁴ But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, ²⁵ And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.

In Jn. 7:46, those who were watching Him concluded, *Never man spake like this man*. ... He was regularly surrounded by disciples, - people who followed Him at the beginning out of wonder and amazement and curiosity, - but there came a 'clearing out', particularly when He explained the Gospel by using the imagery of the bread of life (Jn. 6), ³⁴ Then said they unto him, Lord, evermore give us this bread. ... They didn't understand ... ³⁵ And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. ³⁶ But I said unto you, That ye also have seen me, and believe not.

They had been 'following' Him, listening to Him, watching Him but they did not believe in their own hearts because ... ⁴¹ The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from heaven. He was equating Himself with the manna God gave the children of Israel during the wilderness wanderings in the Old Testament, and so they muttered their objections among themselves, ⁴² And they said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven? ⁴³ Jesus therefore answered and said unto them, Murmur not among yourselves. And

they kept on muttering, ⁶⁰ Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it? ... This makes no sense! ... ⁶¹ When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you? ⁶² What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before? ⁶³ It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life. ⁶⁴ But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him. ⁶⁵ And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father. ... And that was when these fair-weather ‘disciples’ could not ‘take it’ any longer, ⁶⁶ From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. ... The so-called disciples had had enough, so off they went! And then Jesus turned to those who remained, ⁶⁷ Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away?

Out of all the professing ‘disciples’, only twelve remained ... and John actually points out, - in exactly the same passage, - how Jesus knew *they* had to be ‘whittled down’ even more, ⁷⁰ Jesus answered them, Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil [*διάβολος, a false accuser*]? ⁷¹ He spake of Judas Iscariot the son of Simon: for he it was that should betray him, being one of the twelve.

So, when you look at the in-depth training of the Twelve, it really only lasted little more than a year and a half. Like the 32,000 who originally set out to follow Gideon was finally condensed to only three hundred ... the ‘many disciples’ who originally followed Jesus became just a few. ... And yet during His brief time with them He taught them the Scriptures and the doctrines of the Scriptures. He taught and showed them how to live as His true disciples, - how to pray, how to forgive, and how to serve. He spoke to them and explained concerning the things to come. By His power, they healed the sick, cast out demons, and performed many miracles. ... Called by the Lord Jesus, they carried out a work they could *never* have considered themselves capable of! From an earthly point of view, they were called to do the impossible ... and they could never have achieved what they achieved apart from Christ ... and so all the glory *belonged* to Him!

Yes, the disciples made their mistakes, - and many of them, - but following the Day of Pentecost their minds were firmly fixed, focussed and committed to their calling as apostles, ‘sent ones’, the men who were sent by God. And in their work for the Master, each of them *proved* how God’s strength is made perfect in weakness. ... That is how the Holy Spirit upheld them and that is how Jesus was confident in trusting them with the Gospel message.

From His divine perspective, He knew the ultimate success of the work would be brought to fruition through the enabling work of the Holy Spirit. It wasn't the great numbers of disciples who originally followed Him that would change the world ... it was the Holy Spirit working God's sovereign will through the men God had particularly chosen. These disciples were the instruments in His hands. They were the foolish things of the world God had chosen to baffle and bewilder the wise ... the weak things [to confound the things which are mighty](#) (1 Cor. 1:27).

Sometimes in the Gospels they are referred to as disciples (μαθητής ... the word 'discipulus' comes from the Latin), which is a learner, a pupil. It comes from another Greek word, μαθάνω, which means 'to learn', 'to be increased in knowledge', 'to understand'. ... And that was the purpose for which Christ particularly called the Twelve. The Hebrew/Aramaic term for 'disciples' is *talmidim* (cf. *Talmud*, instruction, learning). The *talmidim* would literally follow in the dust of their rabbi - desiring to emulate him in all of his mannerisms. They would eat the same food in exactly the same way as their rabbi. They would go to sleep and awake the same way as their rabbi and, more importantly, they would learn to study Torah and understand God the *exact* same way as their rabbi. ... They were 'copies' and 'imitators' of their rabbi. ... It was similar to the concept of the word employed by Paul, [Eph. 5:1](#) [Be ye therefore followers of God](#) (Γίνεσθε οὖν μιμηταὶ [*imitators*] τοῦ θεοῦ)

These twelve disciples were also referred to as apostles, - whilst at the beginning there were *many* disciples, there were only *twelve* apostles (ἀπόστολος). These were men particularly set aside and *sent* to present a specific message ... They were *emissaries delegated* to *proclaim* the Gospel message, as given to them by Jesus ... and they had His seal of approval and confirmation upon their work, [Mk. 3:14](#) [And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach.](#) ... They were given the Gospel and told what they must do with it! ... They were not 'given a 'free hand', and allowed to see what best way they could decide upon to disseminate it ... No, they were told exactly what to do and how to do it ... to go and *preach* the Gospel.

Once again, these *were* ordinary men. They had 'no airs and graces' ... they were straightforward and straight-talking men to whom God committed the telling of the Gospel to a lost world. Eleven of them shared that passion and

devoted their lives to it. Sometimes they rejoiced, sometimes they suffered, but it was what the Lord had called them to.

To consider them carefully is to get to know the men who became the closest to the Lord Jesus during His earthly life ... and surely that is a worthy study. I guarantee we shall see much of ourselves in them. Also, I trust as we examine and evaluate the disciples individually, the Holy Spirit would use God's Word in the ongoing process of conforming us [to the image of his Son \(Rom. 8:29\)](#). Amen.