

## The 12 Disciples

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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“When Jesus had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease.... [saying...] ‘Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.’” ~ Matthew 10:1 & 8

Last week, in case you missed it, we had a rather detailed review of the names and meaning of each of the 12 sons of Israel as representatives of our own developing state of regeneration, or spiritual growth. The number, 12, of course, is symbolic of everything about a given subject, and so it comes up a lot in the Word: 12 sons, 12 tribes, 12 stones, 12 wells of water, 12 cubits, 12 years, 12 stars, 12 thrones, 12 gates, and much more! Today we’re going to have a somewhat simpler look at the Lord’s 12 disciples and what *they* represent in our spiritual lives.

The review will be simpler in part because the Writings don’t go into anywhere near as much detail about these men as they do about the 12 sons of Israel. Even so, a great deal is said about the first four, and some at least can be inferred about the rest from what is said about them in the literal sense of the Word.

The list of the 12, which is given in Matthew, Mark and Luke, begins with the same four men: Peter, Andrew, James and John. Interestingly, they were two sets of brothers, which illustrates the close relationships of what they represent. Then it goes on to name Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew, the last four being James, Thaddaeus, Simon the Canaanite and Judas. Curiously, in Luke’s version Thaddaeus is not mentioned but instead we find the name, Judas, possibly the brother of James, and he is presumed to be Thaddaeus, and *may* also be the one who wrote the Epistle of Jude. That would make a lot of sense also in terms of the symbolism, since the last four of the Epistles are Peter, James, John and Jude, a sequence that fits beautifully with the meaning of the first 4 disciples, as well as the first 4 of the 12 sons of Israel! In a summary form these men represent the whole initial development of our spiritual lives.

Note, by the way, that in Luke the two Judases are listed together at the end, as if to say there is a positive and negative representation in the name.

But let’s begin at the beginning! Just as Reuben among the sons of Israel represents the truth, that is, a knowledge and understanding of the truth, so *Peter* represents faith. How do we know this? Well, the Writings tell us so. But this of course comes from the context and understanding of what is said about him in the Word. To have faith is to know and believe, and the general thrust of all the stories involving Peter revolves around his faith or belief in the Lord. At times it was rock solid, which is why the Lord called him Peter, a Greek word meaning rock: remember, He, Jesus, had asked the disciples who men were saying He was, and Simon had answered “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” So the Lord blessed him and called him Peter, and said that upon this “rock” He would build His church – the rock being the acknowledgment of His Divinity. But significantly, when Peter questioned the Lord, doubting what He had just said, the Lord called him Satan, and told him to get behind Him. So you see, he can represent a strong or a weak faith, in any case a faith that needs strengthening by other virtues.

Again, when the Lord appeared to the disciples walking on the Sea of Galilee it was Peter who, wanting proof that it was the Lord, asked to go out to Him on the water; but then he began to doubt, he began to sink and the Lord, rescuing him, said, “O you of *little* faith, why did you doubt?” (Matt. 14:31). Again and again Peter vacillates between faith and doubt, or faith and denial, at one point swearing that he would rather die than betray the Lord, and later the same day completely denying that he even knew Him (Matt. 26:33 & 70). But then, after the Lord’s *resurrection* all his doubts are resolved and he becomes one of the most zealous of all the disciples, thus in the book of Acts and Peter’s two Epistles, the main emphasis is on faith).

**Andrew**, then, the next disciple listed, represents obedience. This is because hearing stands for obedience, and in John’s gospel we read that Andrew was the first of the disciples to *hear* John the Baptist speak when he introduced the Lord as “the Lamb of God” (John 1:35-40), and was the first actually to follow Him. In fact, **John** notes that it was Andrew who first told his brother, Simon, about the Lord, and brought *him* also to believe in Him. The fact that Andrew and Simon Peter were brothers shows the close relationship between knowing the truth and obeying, that is, living according to it – or at times, *coming to know it better by living according to it*.

In any case, this is the same as the progression we find in the 12 sons of Israel, where Reuben represents faith and Simeon, whose name means hearing, represents obedience.

Third and fourth in Matthew’s list of the disciples are **James and his brother, John**. Both were sons of a man named Zebedee and they were called by the Lord “Boanerges,” or “sons of thunder.” Why? We don’t know, except that they were both very forceful in their teaching, as we can see in the Epistles written by them. In addition the sound of thunder in the Word is often associated with a heavenly voice or message, and so represents the truth as it is heard or perceived. *Sons* of thunder, then, would be the things that flow or result from the perceptions of truth, and these, together, are the *intentions* and the *acts* of genuine charity, the truths of faith applied to life.

Together James and John on one occasion came to the Lord and asked that they might sit, one on His right hand and the other on His left “in His glory,” that is, when His kingdom would come (Mark 10:35-40). They should have known better! So as the story goes the Lord took them aside and told them that this could *only* be granted to those who would serve others. Now therefore we associate both their names with service – first in the will and then in outward act.

James points us to the will, or desire to be of service, John to the service itself, and again, we can see this in their Epistles.

As for John, he never names himself specifically but in his gospel several times makes it clear that he was the disciple Jesus especially loved (John 13:23, 19:26, 21:7 & 21:20). It is this same John – not John the Baptist – who wrote the book of Revelation AND the three Epistles bearing his name, and it is he of all the apostles who puts the most emphasis on the outward Christian life, criticizing those who behave badly and praising those who live well. His close relationship with the Lord comes out in the several stories in his gospel that are not mentioned in the other gospels, including private prayers and reflections that the Lord did not share with anyone else. And his words speak for themselves when he quotes the Lord saying in various different ways – in his Gospel and in Revelation – “If you love Me, keep my commandments,” or “If you keep My commandments you will abide in My love,” or again, “Behold I am coming quickly, and My

reward is with Me, to give to everyone *according to his work.*”

Do you see the progression so far? In our lives it goes from faith to obedience (or *vice versa*, but still based on knowing what to do as the first step), the next step is to experience a real love for the neighbor that goes hand in hand with good works.

Now we come to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> disciples, *Philip and Bartholomew*, and now the action shifts for the most part from individuals to the disciples as a whole group. Again and again the gospels refer to “the disciples” without naming any one in particular as they recount the Lord’s instruction to them and the many miracles He did for them. In fact Bartholomew is never mentioned again, not even in the Epistles, but we do know a little about Philip. He came from Bethsaida, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee (also the home town of Peter and Andrew). And his name means “a lover of horses.” Now since a horse corresponds to understanding, and a sea shore corresponds to learning, it’s fairly clear that Philip himself represents another, perhaps more advanced intellectual state, going deeper into the things that have been learned in the first state represented by Peter. So it was Philip who asked the Lord to show them the Father, to which the Lord replied that He and the Father are one and the same (John 14:7-11).

Note, by the way, that this question implies some doubt, or lack of understanding. So, like Peter, Philip needs a lot of reassurance, which is always the case until we have fully integrated our faith into our lives – not just as a matter of doing but as a matter of commitment to the Lord.

7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> in the list of disciples are *Thomas and Matthew*, Thomas of course made famous by his doubt about the Lord’s resurrection, saying he would only believe if he could actually feel the scars from His crucifixion, and Matthew being a tax collector – among the most despised people in the New Testament.

Now this is interesting. The only place in Scripture where Thomas gets any special mention is in the same context as Philip’s question, that is, at the beginning of John, chapter 14, where the Lord famously says, “I go to prepare a place for you... that where I am you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know,” at which point Thomas answers, “Lord, we do *not* know where you are going, and how *can* we know the way?”

Notice again, these doubts and questions among the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> disciples, all of whom were either from Galilee or working for the Roman Empire, relate specifically to the Divinity and purpose of the Lord. Who *IS* this amazing Man? How can we understand Him? Again in the representative sense we are working through similar states as the first 4 disciples: faith, obedience, a charitable attitude and service, but in this series it is all about the Lord Himself. And so it is in our lives: first we honor and respect what the Lord *says*, then we begin to explore who the Lord really *IS*, and how we relate to Him, and what that involves on a deeper level.

The 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> disciples in the list are *James, the son of Alphaeus and Lebbeus (or Thaddaeus)*. Scholars believe Thaddaeus was also called *Jude*, who in his Epistle refers to himself as the brother of James. If he meant this literally, then we have a third recognized set of brothers, again highlighting the close relationship between what the two men represent. The name, Jude, obviously means “a Jew,” and so it’s not surprising to see him referring extensively to Jewish history in his Epistle, and the fact that he and James were brothers means they were both Jews.

So what, you say? Well, we're not told explicitly what this means, but we do know that the Lord came into the world to save the Jews (along with everybody else!) and so a particular appeal to those of the Jewish faith, and **by** those **in** the Jewish faith makes perfect sense literally. Then again, as part of the representative series, James and Jude serve as reminders calling us all out of a worldly, materialistic religious culture into a truly spiritual culture of love for the Lord.

And here let me just say that if you want some really inspirational and practical spiritual reading do not neglect the Epistles, especially those of Peter, James, John and Jude. They are powerful, encouraging testimonies from people who followed the Lord throughout His ministry and saw Him transformed after His resurrection.

The last two of the 12 listed are **Simon, the Canaanite and Judas Iscariot**, who betrayed the Lord with a kiss. These two were probably also both Jews from the heart of Israel, Iscariot possibly referring to his home town of Kerioth. In fact Judas may have been this Simon's son (John 13:2, 26). Curiously nothing more is said about Simon, the Canaanite, except that the word, Canaanite, comes from the Hebrew meaning "zealous," so he was also called "the Zealot" in the book of Acts (1:13). This fits nicely as the near-culmination of the whole series representatively, since zeal is a quality that we can only experience when we are fully committed to the Lord.

How, then, could the last disciple, the one with the absolute worst reputation, be the one to represent the completion of the progress of our regeneration? Well, consider this. First, the heavenly doctrine is clear that Judas was among the 12 who were called together in the spiritual world to serve the Lord in proclaiming His Divine Humanity (TCR 791). So it was as the Lord said when He was crucified: *they did not know what they were doing*. This clearly applies to Judas, who may very well have betrayed the Lord **thinking He would seize the moment to overwhelm His enemies and assume His rightful place as King**. In other words, he, like Peter, who tried to resist the Lord's arrest, may have been trying to **help** the Lord "get on with it." Of course this was foolish, but it was symptomatic of the misunderstanding they ALL had about the Lord. Remember, they ALL abandoned Him at the crucifixion; they ALL messed up. But the Lord knew this would happen and of course He forgave every one of them. Remember, too, that when Judas realized what he had done he was so filled with remorse that he committed suicide.

So, do WE really understand the Lord's work for us? Are WE much better than any of the 12? Maybe. And maybe not. Each one represents a stage in our full development as followers of the Lord, even until we finally get to the point of realizing how flawed our own understanding of Him really is and we are willing to lay down our lives for His sake – not to do ourselves in as Judas did but to acknowledge our foolish ways and turn to Him and learn from Him and share the gospel of His Divine Humanity with all zeal and industry, as the original 12 disciples are doing even now in the spiritual world.

Amen.

Lessons: **I Samuel**: 1 (selections)  
Children's talk on the miraculous birth of Samuel

**Matthew** 10:1-10, 16-20 and **True Christian Religion** #154 & 108:2