

The Twelve: Lessons from the Lesser Knowns, Part 1

Luke 6:14-16

Take a look at Luke 6:12, “In these days he,” Jesus, “went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. When day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named Apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot, and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.”

Admittedly, there is not a lot written about the lesser-known Apostles in Scripture. There is a good portion in tradition, but it’s hard to determine fact from fiction. We’re not going speculate about these Apostles. We’re not gonna try to fill in all the white spaces, because I think God has provided a number of important lessons for us to learn from what is written, plenty of encouragement to glean from what is actually recorded, and even some lessons from the fact that the Bible is relatively silent about most of these men.

So as we get into this, take a look again at that list of names in Luke 6:14 to 16. That list is organized basically into the same three groups. If you compare this list with what's recorded in Matthew, Mark, and then Acts Chapter 1:13, you see the same list, you see the same groupings as well. There's a first group, an inner circle, led by Peter, then Andrew, James and John. The second group is led by Philip, and it's followed by Bartholomew, Matthew, and Thomas. Andrew seems to form a kind of bridge between the first and second groups as we'll see. Then there's a third group of Apostles: James the son of Alphaeus leads the list, then Simon the Zealot, Judas son of James, and then Judas Iscariot.

Here's how we're going to cover eight of the twelve Apostles. First, we're going to study a group that I like to call the Bible students: Andrew, Philip and Bartholomew. Then we're going to look at Matthew and Thomas, two men who I believe were deeply grateful for their salvation, deeply grateful to know Christ and deeply devoted to him, loyal to him in love. And finally, we're going to consider the three men who served Christ faithfully, but, according to history, quietly, in obscurity. Those are the final names on the list: James, son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas son of James. Not much we know about them, and there's something to learn from that as well.

First thing we need to learn from these lesser-known Apostles: Set your heart to study scripture diligently, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, set your heart to study Scripture diligently. Andrew, we know as Peter's younger brother, he's the man who liked to go around introducing everyone to Jesus, that's the picture we get of him. Philip, we know as well; he's a friend of Andrew, a companion of him. We'll look at that as well. By process of comparison, contrast, by process of elimination, we come to the conclusion that Bartholomew and Nathanael are one and the same man. All that the synoptic Gospels can tell us about any Bartholomew is that he's numbered among the Twelve, anything else we learn about him is gonna come from John's Gospel and what he tells us about Nathanael.

So with that in mind, let's turn over to John's Gospel, John, Chapter 1, and we're going to learn a few things about this man Nathanael. I'll just mention a couple of things about the close connection between Andrew and Philip. In the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Andrew and Philip only receive brief mention. They're just named, not much more about them there. We might put Andrew in another list second or a third list of the Apostles, except for his close connection with Peter. He was Peter's brother, so he's always tagging along and he's in that inner circle of the most intimate disciples. But

even Jesus would sometimes single out Peter, James, and John and leave out poor Andrew.

We do find an incident in which Andrew is numbered with the inner circle. In Mark 13:3 it says, that "As, Jesus, "sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew" tagging along. They "asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?'"

These guys are curious Bible students, always eager to learn and understand and, and we find as Jesus answered the questions, we get this prophecy about the end times that we call the Olivet Discourse. All that's prompted by the private questions of that inner circle, in which Andrew is sometimes included and as we're gonna see, Andrew is associated with other curious Bible students among the Twelve as well.

It's Andrew, actually, who's the guy who keeps them all connected. The rest of what we learn about Andrew, as well as Philip and Nathanael or Bartholomew, it all comes through John's Gospel. What we learn there starting in John 1 is that there is a close connection between Andrew, who has a position in that first group of Apostles, and then Philip and Nathanael who are in that second group of Apostles.

A picture emerges there which puts Andrew at the center of, of making connections. He's that guy who's like the social adhesive in a group. He keeps everybody joined together. He's always making connections, and he's relational. That's actually the first image we get of Andrew there in John 1:35, "The next day John," that is John the Baptist, he "was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, 'What are you seeking?' And they said to him, 'Rabbi,'" which means teacher, "'where are you staying?' and he said to them, 'Come and you will see.' So they came and saw where he was staying and stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour," that is maybe about four in the afternoon. "One of the two who had heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother and he first found his own brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which means Christ). And he brought him to Jesus."

We can stop reading there. There's Andrew, that's how we're introduced to Andrew, making connections. The next day, Jesus found Philip, verse 43, and he's a friend of Andrew and Peter. Philip is from the same city of Bethsaida and then in verse 45, Philip did what Andrew did. He found his friend Nathanael, and

he told him about Jesus. These guys are key in keeping the Apostles bonded together and if you think about it, if all the Apostles were like Peter, all having Peter's personality, they'd be flying all over the place. They'd be shooting off in all kinds of different directions, following their own impetuous natures.

If they were all like James and John, all hammer and tongs, the group would be like a dark thundercloud. You know, you'd see this group coming and you'd take shelter and hide from the coming storm that's about to come down on you. So Jesus, in addition to men like Peter, and James, and John, he also chose some milder natured men, friendly men, socially gracious, winsome people, men like Andrew and Philip; really to keep this Apostle band from splitting apart.

In John 12:20, we read another interesting story about some Greek proselytes. They'd come to Jerusalem for celebrating the Passover. Having joined themselves to the Jewish community, they wanted to be there at the three major festivals, and they all come, and they want to meet Jesus, and it's interesting that of all the Apostles, they approach Philip, not James, not John, not Peter, they approach Philip. He's from Bethsaida, as we said. He's from Galilee, he's fluent in Greek, and he's evidently a man who's approachable to these foreigners, a man with whom they

felt comfortable. So these Greeks, they come to Philip and they say, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." And you know what Philip does? It says in verse 21-22 that Philip went first not to Jesus; first, he went and told Andrew, and then Andrew and Philip together went and told Jesus.

We find Andrew and Philip together in close connection in other places in John's Gospel, as well. Earlier in John's Gospel, earlier than John chapter 12, in chapter 6 remember, this is the incident of the feeding to the 5,000. It's interesting to read not just the fact of the miracle, but Jesus' intention to teach his disciples. He wants them to see not just the miracle, but he wants them to see the sign that's pointed out by the miracle.

Notice there in verse 4, we'll start, start reading there. "Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand," this is a different one than John 12. "Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, 'Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is

a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?' Jesus said, 'Have the people sit down.'"

And then the miracle happens. He fed them all. Jesus fully satisfied 5,000 men, and that's just the men. There's also women and children, families. They're all fed there, 10,000 people, maybe 15,000, maybe 20,000. Jesus is preparing these men, Philip and Andrew, ahead of time. He's preparing them before he performed the sign. He's, he's getting them to think, getting them ready to see something remarkable, and what Jesus wanted Philip and Andrew to see and understand is that he's greater than Moses that he himself is the bread of heaven with the power to feed God's people. That's obviously a lesson for all the Apostles.

So why is it that Jesus singled out Philip and Andrew for this lesson? He knew what he was gonna do. Why single them out? Why did he test them in particular just prior to performing the sign? Well, with that in mind, just go back then to John chapter 1, and let's look at this very first glimpse that we get of Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael from the very earliest days. We already read there in verses 35-42 that when Andrew brought his brother to Jesus, Andrew had been joined to the disciples of John the Baptist, and that tells me something about his

understanding of Scripture. It tells me something about his concern to repent and to prepare his heart for the coming Messiah.

He's obviously anticipating the Messiah such that when John pointed and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God," Andrew immediately abandoned John to follow Jesus, as he should. You know that reference to the Lamb of God? You can't really find that reference in Scripture. You go back to Genesis 22, mentioned in Hebrews 11, where Abraham offered up his son Isaac, and yet, remember the angel of the Lord stopped him? He showed him a ram caught in the thicket by its horns, a picture of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Andrew had to have thought about that, this Lamb of God.

He'd now left immediately. He's tied not to John, but he's tied to the truth. He immediately follows Jesus, and when he finds his brother in verse 41, Andrew announced to him, not about the Lamb of God, he says, "We have found the Messiah." He makes the connection there. That's a lot of thinking. That's a lot of meditation on truth. We read over it very, very quickly, but I believe this Messianic anticipation on his part, it's not just an impulse. I believe that Andrew and his friends had been studying, they'd been waiting, they'd been anticipating for quite

some time, and I think that's what John wants us to see as this passage unfolds.

Take a look at the introduction to Philip and Nathanael in verses 43 to 46, "The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.'" Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, "Come and see.'"

That was quite an intriguing way for Philip to entice, who by nature, a man like Nathanael, seems to be cynical, seems to be skeptical about Jesus' origin. Philip, in order to entice him to come and see for himself, he starts with what's biblical, with what's prophesied, and then he connects it to Jesus. "We have found the one predicted in Scripture, the one of whom Moses wrote in the law, the one of whom the prophets wrote." And then Philip makes the connection to a real man from a real place in their time, a Davidic descendant, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph and despite Nathanael's seemingly abrasive reply, what Philip told Nathanael was enough to get him up and bring him to see for himself. As a fellow student of Scripture, as someone

who, like Andrew and Philip, was anticipating the coming of the Messiah, Nathanael is here intrigued.

Look at verse 47, "Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed,' who, 'in whom there is no deceit!'" Jesus evidently didn't say this directly to Nathanael, though Nathanael heard him say it. He's talking to the other disciples, pointing at Nathanael. He's making a point. He's, he's pointing out about Nathanael that he has this guileless nature, but there's also a subtle statement about Nathanael as a straight shooter, in contrast, by the way, with the nation of Israel, which follows the pattern of that prototype Jacob, the name means, deceiver, one who grabs the heel. That's how the nation was characterized.

In contrast, here's Nathanael, not a deceiver, not someone who's trying get something, but someone who's a straight shooter, a straight talker, guileless. In other words, Jesus is saying, hey, check this out everyone, an Israelite, one who isn't a deceiver. What do you know? He's making a point. So first it's a point about a commendation about Nathanael's character, but second, it's a point of condemnation about Israel's character.

Third, we see from the rest of the narrative that Jesus wants to plant a seed in these disciples' minds and he wants them thinking about Jacob and about Israel. Look at the rest of the narrative. He's preparing their minds for what he's about to teach them all in the flow of a conversation, all in connection to this introduction to Nathanael. Verse 48 "Nathanael said to Jesus, 'How do you know me?'" He wants to understand how Jesus, whom he had never met, has any familiarity whatsoever with his nature or his character. So Jesus just gives him a couple of facts and, by the way, a glimpse into his divinity, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.'" "

John wants us to see, Jesus had divine insight, knowledge, getting into Nathanael's head. What comes next in verse 49? It's an amazing early confession of Jesus' true identity. Nathanael answered Jesus not, hey, why have you been spying on me? Or hey, were you hiding around the bush? He doesn't say anything like that. He says what? "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" That response opens up what Nathanael was thinking about. Doesn't it.

It also reveals Nathanael's familiarity with the Old Testament. Psalm 2 about the divine sonship of Jesus Christ, 2

Samuel 7, about the promise of a Davidic King, Deuteronomy 18 certainly factored into his mind as he knows the promise of Moses to look to a prophet like him who will come later. This guileless man, he has just seen prophetic Scripture coming to light in fulfillment right in front of his very eyes.

Whereas before, Nathanael didn't even address Jesus with any term of respect, now he calls him, Rabbi. Whereas before Nathanael is rather cynical about anything good coming out of Nazareth, now he sees Jesus' true origin as the Son of God. Whereas before Nathanael was reluctant to share in Philip's excitement about this fulfillment, "Him of whom Moses and the Law and also the Prophets wrote," now he concludes with Philip, that this Jesus of Nazareth, this son of Joseph is the King of Israel.

Andrew's there to hear this, so is Philip, along with Simon Peter, John as well, but these three, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael, here, they're rejoicing at the very beginning, at the very introduction to Jesus. They're seeing their own satisfaction and joy in seeing the word of God come alive right in front of their faces. They'd just witnessed John 1:14, The Word had become flesh and was dwelling and standing right in front of them. They had just seen his glory, "Glory as of the

only Son from the father, full of grace and truth.” Incredible moment!

Jesus had promised them, he’s speaking to Nathanael in John chapter 1, but the promise is for all of them as I’m going to show you. Jesus promised these diligent Bible Students that they would see incredible things. Look there in John 1:50. Jesus’ response to Nathanael, his, that that affirmation of Jesus’ divinity and Messianic royalty. “Jesus answers him, ‘Because I said to you, “I saw you under the fig tree,” do you believe? You will see greater things than these.’ And he said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.’”

So what does Jesus mean here by this promise? Heaven opened? Angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man? What is that about? Well, it’s a clear reference that these Bible students would immediately pick up on. Do you know where their minds went? Genesis 28, Genesis 28 verse 12 and following. That’s the passage of Scripture that describes Jacob dreaming, right? He’s at Bethel. Bethel, which means, house of God. And he’s dreaming there about a ladder that’s set up on earth, and the ladder has the top of the ladder reaching into heaven itself. And it says there, “Behold, the angels of God were

ascending on the ladder and descending on the ladder." They're starting from the earth, which demonstrates the angelic ministry to the saints on earth. They're starting there, they're ascending into heaven, getting their orders and coming back to earth, all on this ladder. "And behold," verse 13 of Genesis 28, "The Lord," Yahweh, "stood above it and he said," I am Yahweh, "I am the Lord the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac."

It's a two-fold promise here that Jesus gives. He says, you will see that. You're going to see the heavens opened and you're your gonna see, number two, you're going to see the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. The heavens opened, that's a promise of salvation there. Promise of salvation, intimacy with God, access to heaven, it's a promise that is only fulfilled through the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. He died, 1 Peter 3:18, "Suffering once for sins [...] to bring sinners to God."

But instead of the angels of God ascending and descending on Jacob's ladder, Jesus is now standing in place of the ladder. He is the ladder. He's become the ladder. He is the mediator between heaven and earth, and no longer is this promise in the vision for Israel alone, for Jacob at Bethel, at the house of

God. Now, the tabernacle of God is among men in Jesus Christ, and the promise is for all who believe. Here's these Bible students: Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael and this is the day, number one, of knowing Jesus Christ. This is day one for them. Here's the reward of all that study of Scripture, from their upbringing and all the way to this point, and they find the richness of Christ fulfilled in all of Scripture. All that meditation under the fig tree, all that study growing up, all of that consummated in the thrill of the everlasting joy of meeting Jesus, the God of very God is standing in front of them and they can know him.

Their hearts were filled with joy to see Jesus revealed in Scripture. Beloved, that's the lesson for us as disciples, that we can learn from these students of Scripture. Set your heart to study Scripture diligently. Listen, if God is your eternal reward, if Christ is your treasure, then whatever he has said becomes the object of your devoted study so that you can worship him. You're going to want to know it thoroughly, as deeply as you can, that you might not only know the facts, but then obey its precepts so you might live in wisdom and understanding, and then go out and tell others about him because whatever you teach, you keep; whatever you give away, you hold, you learn, and you understand.



Don't be satisfied with just coming once a Sunday to listen to teaching here at the church, even twice week, even three times a week. That's good. Gifted teachers in the church are given to you by Christ for your edification. But listen, you've got to take that back into your private place, under your own fig tree that you might meditate and learn and know and worship and be filled with joy.