

The Twelve: Lessons from the Lesser Knowns, Part 2

Luke 6:14-16

Here's a second lesson which we're going to learn from the next two men, Matthew and Thomas. Matthew and Thomas teach us to set your heart to love Christ fervently. Set your heart to love Christ fervently. Set your Christ in your full affections. Matthew and Thomas are the last two Apostles in the second group and I like to think of these two men as lovers of Christ because Jesus Christ meant everything to them.

Matthew is also called Levi by Mark and Luke, and when they list him among the Apostles, he's named before Thomas. In Matthew's Gospel, he comes after Thomas. He names himself after Thomas at the very end of the list. It's notable, in his Gospel, in his list, when he lists his name among, among the twelve, unlike the other authors, he calls himself Matthew, by the way, the tax collector. He wants you to know where he came from; where Mark and Luke don't mention that, just Matthew.

It's remarkable that in writing a gospel that bears his name, the Gospel of Matthew, we really learn nothing more about

Matthew than we already knew from the other Gospels. He's never mentioned, actually, in John's Gospel. The only thing we know about Matthew really is what happened at this time of his calling into following Christ. It's a remarkable lesson about the nature of God's incredible sovereign grace. It's as if God wants us to focus on where Matthew had come from and what Jesus had done for him. Matthew becomes a lesson about the depth of God's grace, because if Jesus could call Matthew, a betrayer of his people, a collaborator with the Romans, one who built and used thugs to go and bilk money out of his fellow Israelites, a guy that is despised, was absolutely despised, if God could send Jesus to call Matthew out of that tax office, to follow him as a disciple, you know what, there's no distance that's too great for God's grace to reach; reach every single one of us.

And Matthew's absolutely thrilled to be chosen by Christ. He was so overjoyed, as we read in Luke 5, that he left his tax office immediately. He left it all behind, didn't even care about the receipts for that day. He just took off. He took off, no questions, no demands, just gratitude. In fact, his gratitude is such that he threw a banquet for Jesus and the disciples. He invited all his tax collector, rabble-like friends. He wanted all of them to meet Jesus. It's profound gratitude, an abiding and a contented joy that now that he has Jesus, and now that

he's with Jesus, he doesn't want anything more. Before, he was driven by greed, he was driven by money, now he just has Christ. What else does he need? Completely content; that comes through in the narrative. That's enough for him.

What about Thomas? Apart from his inclusion in the apostolic list, the only place we learn about Thomas is, once again, from John's Gospel. There's nothing about Thomas in the Synoptic Gospels, but John records his words, actually, in John 11, John 14, John 20. By the time we get to John 20:24, Jesus is now risen from the dead. He appeared to all the disciples. In the passage just previous, he appeared to all of them except for Thomas. He's absent. Do you think that was an accident? Do you think Jesus looked around when he got there and thought, where, where's Thomas, man? I really miscalculated. I should've appeared when they're all together. No! It's intentional. So they all saw Jesus apart from Thomas. They saw the nail prints in his hands and feet, the spear wound in his side. Jesus said to them in John 20:21, "Peace be with you. As the father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And then he breathed on them. He's conveying to them the promise of the Holy Spirit who would come, Acts chapter 2, to empower the ministry of Christ, which would continue in and through those men.

Thomas, he's not there with them at the time. And that's, as I said, intentional on the plan of Christ. Why? So he could teach us something. Look at verse 24, "Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came." "So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see," the hands, "in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.'"

Why does he say that? Is he hard-hearted? Is this the heart of a skeptic? Is this an expression of virtue for demanding empirical evidence, scientific proof? Are we seeing Thomas become, Doubting Thomas, the patron saint of all the atheists and the agnostics out there? No, not at all. I think the opposite is actually true here. I believe Thomas' disbelief at this point, by the way, it's not excusable, it's not justifiable, because unbelief is never excusable and justifiable. Jesus always rebukes unbelief. He always chastises his disciples even when they have little faith, he chastises them. Why? Because he wants it to be great faith. Is there anything in God that warrants us not believing in him? No way! The more we know God, the more we see all unbelief is unwarranted. The only response to God is belief, trust, love, devotion, worship. That's all that's allowed. Anytime we don't believe, it's inexcusable,

really, because unbelief is really a slander against the character of God.

But nevertheless, on a human level, I believe Thomas' reticence to believe here, is born out of a deep, deep disappointment, a deep sorrow and it's a sorrow that came from really what he had was a deep love for Jesus Christ. Back in John 11 when the disciples found out that Lazarus died, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, Jesus intended to go to Bethany anyway even though he had died and that brought Jesus in close proximity to Jerusalem, and Jerusalem is a city that is swarming with religious leaders who want Jesus dead.

The Apostles don't think this is a great idea to come near to Jerusalem at this time, but Thomas, in contrast to the rest of those men, he steeled himself, and he tried to encourage his fellow disciples and he said to them, John 11:16, "Let us go that we may also die with him." What's he doing here? Is this death-wish theology? Is this merely him playing the stoic? No, I don't think so. I think he's calling the other disciples to have that same courage. After all, at the end of John chapter 6, they had altogether affirmed with Peter, John 6:68, they had nowhere else to go. I mean, Jesus and Jesus alone has the words of eternal life, so apart from Jesus, what meaning or point is

there to life? We might as well go with him, and if we die with him, we die with him. What is good without Jesus being here?

In fact, in the Upper Room, Jesus was again telling his disciples of his departure. He said, "I go to prepare a place for you," and, "I will come again, I'll take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. You know the way to where I am going." That was upsetting news. And the first disciple to speak up about it, was it the impetuous Peter? No. Was it the Sons of Thunder? No again. It's the sensitive-hearted Thomas, this one who loved Jesus dearly. He couldn't imagine life without Jesus, so he asked Jesus, John 14:5, Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him rightly, famously, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me."

Thomas is like Matthew; he loves Jesus dearly, but his reaction to Jesus' death, because it's not informed by an understanding of the truth, because it's not informed by faith, that's informed by an understanding of the truth, his sentiment, his emotion had led him into a sinful response of unbelief. Here he is even denying the testimony of his fellow believers, fellow lovers of Jesus Christ. They all tell him, "He's risen!" The response of every disciple since this time, all of us, we haven't

seen him, we haven't touched his nail prints, we haven't put our hands into his side and yet, we believe, don't we?

Blessed are those who believe even without seeing. That's the point of including Thomas here in this narrative, here at the very end. It's not good, obviously, for Thomas to disbelieve, but Jesus' restoration of Thomas here is specific, it's precious, it's intentional, it provides a key lesson for all of us. Look at verse 26, John 20, "Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. And although 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, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'"

There is one article governing that section, that phrase, right there, "Lord and God." It unites the two terms into one. It's only talking about one person. That is, Thomas doesn't look at Jesus and say, "My Lord," and then look up to heaven and say, "My God," as the Jehovah's Witnesses would have us believe, as the Arians want to tell us to believe. No. "My Lord and my God" it's the same, one and the same person, it's Jesus Christ. This is a great apologetic text. Mark that down. "Thomas answered

him, 'My Lord and my God!' and Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'"

This incident with Thomas, as Jesus restored this disappointed and dejected disciple, it leads to the purpose statement for the entire Gospel of John. Look at it in verse 30, "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." That was affirmed from the very beginning, all the way through, here to the very end. And John saying, "Look, I'm an eye-witness; trust what I am telling you."

Look, there's objective truth. Our faith is based in truth. We need to hear God's Word that we might believe God's Word and in believing, we come to understand. Our love and our devotion is informed by truth. When our devotion to Christ is uninformed by truth, our faith is weak; it's not strong. Like Thomas, our professed love to Christ can quickly reverse course and turn into a denial of faith in Christ, when we're tested, when we're faced with temptations and trials. Look, we have to combine a fervent love for Christ with a diligent study of his Word. Why?



So we might become strong and useful in a lifelong service to him.

Matthew's profound gratitude and love for Christ that made him useful. He was content from the very beginning. He even continues to reference his tax collector background because it became an asset. Not just in reminding him of the gratitude he had for Christ saving him and then putting him into the disciples and then even naming him as an Apostle, but Matthew's tax collector skills actually became useful in writing the Gospel. The pen that he used to use to record tax receipts became the very tool that he used for authoring the earliest Gospel.

We read in Eusebius that Christ sent Thomas north and east to the Parthenian Kingdom, modern day Iran. And his love was strengthened in faith, as he met those unbelievers, it deepened in the truth. He saw the truth, he saw the contrast with the lies and the darkness of that kingdom, and he was faithful to the very end. Both of these men, Matthew and Thomas, they remembered where they came from. And their gratitude became passionate love for Jesus Christ that carried them to the very end.

Well, that was way too brief, but we need to keep moving. One more set of Apostles and a final lesson here. Set your heart to study Scripture diligently, to love Christ fervently, and finally, set your heart to serve God faithfully. Set your heart to serve God faithfully. There's just not much said about these three men in the final group of the twelve.

But there's a James, the son of Alphaeus, first of all, Mark 15:40, he's called James, *mikros* in the Greek. It's a nickname that may refer to his small stature, but more likely it refers to his age in relation to Big James, you know, the son of Big Jimmy, the son of Zebedee. So here he's known as James the less, he's known as James the younger, or maybe Little James. I like that one, Little James.

From the crucifixion narratives, Matthew 27 verses 55 and 56, Mark 15:40-41, Luke 24:10, we learn that the mother of this man, her name is Mary, and he had a brother named Joseph or Joses. From John 19:25, it would seem that his father's name was Clopas. We can take, Alphaeus, as maybe a family name or something like that. But James' mother, Mary, she was among the many women who followed Jesus from Galilee, including Mary Magdalene, Salome, that is Mrs. Zebedee, the mother of James and John.

So Mary, James, son of Alphaeus, his mother, Mary Magdalene, Salome, these women are ministering to Jesus and they become witnesses to his crucifixion, along with Mary, the mother of Jesus. A lot of Marys around the cross. But, Mary, the mother of Little James, along with Mary Magdalene, she visited the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with spices. So the love and devotion to Jesus was in the family.

The second person, Simon the Zealot, interesting guy. Both Matthew and Mark refer to Simon as Simon the Cananaean, Matthew 10:4 and Mark 3:18. That's Cananaean, by the way, not Canaanite, which is how the King James Version incorrectly translated the word. The word, Cananaean, means enthusiast, or zealot. Luke preferred to identify Simon by his political sympathies, whether this is his former association with the zealots, or perhaps a stronger, more formal political affiliation with the Zealot party, like a card-carrying member, we don't know exactly.

Josephus describes the Zealot party of Judaism as one of the four groups that he lists and describes there, along with the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes. Zealots were fierce nationalists. Josephus obviously didn't like them because they, in their nationalistic, fierce nationalistic spirit actually led

to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. They hated everyone who collaborated with the Romans. Hated them.

They're like today's terrorists. They weren't opposed to using fear and intimidation and violence as a means to achieve their political ends. There were actually some Jewish assassins called the Sicarii, who rose up from the Zealot party. They used to assassinate certain officials. You can read about a revolt mentioned in Acts 5:37, happened during the days of Herod the Great. It was led by a man named Judas the Galilean. That revolt was associated with the Zealot Party. As I said, the uprising that led to the ultimate destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70, also fomented by the Zealot party.

Jesus' choice, here, of Simon the Zealot, it put him in close association with Matthew. Isn't that interesting? A former tax collector, a hated Roman collaborator, evidence in and of itself of the reconciling power of Jesus Christ. And also his mercy toward Simon because if Jesus hadn't rescued Simon from political entanglements, it's not unreasonable that he might be dead by AD 70. Part of the failed uprising against Rome, you may have read about the slaughter at Masada, those were Zealots, as well. Jesus had a more useful, eternal purpose for Simon's life.

It's also interesting to note that in Matthew and Mark, their listings of the twelve, they list Simon the Zealot as the last of the faithful Apostles that they name, and he's named right next to Judas Iscariot. Judas Iscariot, he's the only Judean in the list and it could be that, a hint that both of those men held nationalistic sympathies. Whereas Judas Iscariot succumbed to a temptation to seek a political course of action, opting for a pragmatic course, collaborating with Jewish authorities, Simon the Zealot ultimately sided with Christ and remained faithful to the end.

So Little James, Simon the Zealot, finally there is Judas the son of James. In the lists in Matthew and Mark, he's called Thaddaeus. Thaddaeus. Some textual variants call him Lebbaeus even though it seems that Thaddaeus is the best reading. It's likely that this Apostle was known by his given name Judas, and then a nickname, which is Thaddaeus in the Aramaic and Lebbaeus from the Hebrew. Thaddaeus is a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic *thaddai*. It refers to the heart, and it likely means there, courageous heart. Lebbaeus also, from the Hebrew, the word *leb*, in Hebrew the word heart, again points to the strength of character of Judas, son of James. We might say, that guy's all heart or that guy has courage or a courageous heart. Not too much to infer about him. We don't know.

But his nickname may tell us about, something about this man's courage or his faithfulness or his heart of concern for people. We get that glimpse, a single snapshot, a bit of evidence that could give us some insight from John 14:22. Again, we're indebted to John for including this question asked by Judas son of James. John records this, "Judas (not Iscariot) said to Jesus, 'Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?' Jesus answered him, 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my father will love him, and will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine, but the father's who sent me.'"

That is to say, Jesus is exclusive, and he's selective in who he reveals himself to. The gift of seeing God is only for those who love Christ, for those who keep his Word. Those who don't love him and keep his words, whether it's people who reject him, or who worship false gods, or who profess Christ's name, but only by name, they don't obey his word, apart from repentance, those people will never see God. That's a very important teaching, isn't it? Perhaps it's a difficult teaching especially for those with sensitive hearts, men like this Judas, son of James, this Thaddaeus, seem to have. We're indebted to one of

these little-known Apostles for asking a question to clarify the exclusivity of Jesus' choice to manifest himself to believers only, but not to those who don't love him and don't obey his Word.

That's pretty much all we know about those three Apostles: James, son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas son of James, they ministered faithfully, but also they ministered in obscurity. All the Apostles, like these men that we've talked about this morning, they studied Scripture diligently, they loved Christ fervently, and they served him faithfully to the very end. Most of them lived and ministered and died in obscurity. That's us, folks, that's us. We have to acknowledge the sovereign choice of Jesus Christ in this matter between those who are well-known and those who minister and die in obscurity. That's God's choice.

Most of Christ's servants who minister faithfully, they also minister in relative obscurity. They're known no further than their own relatively small circle of influence. And those few who, like Peter and John, are more widely known, the longer they live, the more they want to see the name of Jesus Christ upheld in honor and glory, and their own names disappear from memory. And were it not for the larger purposes of God and Christ in

their lives, they would take their name out of the record. Again, Jesus is sovereign over those kinds of things.

In an age of media and celebrity, when everyone is seeking their 15 minutes of fame, it's an easy and common temptation for people to aspire to become well-known, to become a celebrated name even within the evangelical church. That ought not to be, but it is. It's a reality of our modern media age. It's a temptation unique to our time.

Along the way, he's raised up some, but along the way, he's chosen to keep many others in obscurity. Why? That his name might be preeminent among us. A key question for us all is, will we be found faithful in the end? That was Paul's ambition, to be found faithful as a servant of Christ, as a steward of the mysteries of God. That is the lesson that we learn from these last three servants.