

## **“He Called His Disciples” (Luke 6:12–16)**

**September 23, 2018**

**Brian Watson**

Our younger son, Simon, started playing soccer this fall. He’s only 6 years old and he’s playing in a league of 6-year-olds and 7-year-olds. He had his second game yesterday and it’s interesting to see how, even at that young age, different kids have different athletic abilities. Some are bigger and some quite small. Some are faster than others and some are more coordinated. Some have a good sense of the game, where the ball is going and where it needs to go.

I don’t know how these kids are assigned to different teams. But it would be pretty easy to pick which kids you’d want on your team. There was one kid yesterday, on the other team, who could dribble through traffic and who scored two goals—one with the right foot, and one with the left. I’d pick that kid first if I were building a team.

Did you ever have that experience as a kid when captains were picking teams to play a sport? Maybe you were the one who did the picking. You know how this goes: all the people who want to play are lined up and two people take turns picking these players to be on their team. Usually, the first choices are obvious. The fast, coordinated, strong players are picked first. If you’re playing basketball, you’d pick the tall people quickly. Then you pick the average players. Eventually, you pick the people who look like they couldn’t run if they were undercooked eggs. Maybe you were always the last one picked and this whole idea brings traumatic memories to mind.

But imagine for a moment that you were building your own professional sports team. Imagine you could build your own Dream Team of the very best players in that sport. Money is not an issue here, and there’s no salary cap. Most of your picks would be pretty obvious ones. You’d pick the fastest, strongest, most coordinated, winningest athletes.

Now, imagine you were building a company from scratch. Let’s say this is some kind of tech company. Who would you want on your team? You’d want the genius computer whizzes. You’d want the best designers, the best financial officers, the best marketing guys. You’d want people who could design a product, make a product, sell the product, manage the money, and manage the personnel. You’d want the smartest, the best educated, the most creative.

Imagine you were a political leader, and you're assembling your cabinet. Who would you want? You also would want the smartest and best educated people. But you would want other people, people who were connected, people who were powerful, people who could get things done. You'd want public policy wonks and power brokers, ideas people and influence people.

Now imagine that you're building something far more important than a sports team, a company, or even a nation. Imagine that you're going to establish the kingdom of God on Earth. Let's say that you happen to be God, and you come to Earth and you want to pick a dozen guys who will witness the things you do and say, who will train with you, and who will carry on your work after you've gone back to heaven. Who would you pick? You'd pick the religious leaders, right? You know, the people who know the Bible the best. Or you'd pick powerful people, like kings and princes. Maybe you'd want some rich people, and you always need a few smart, egghead types. You'd want people who are calm-headed, even-keeled, not people who act rashly, right? So, who would you pick?

Well, those are very hypothetical situations. The bad news is that none of us will be owners of professional sports teams or Fortune 500 companies. I'm pretty not one of us is going to be president or governor. But there is good news: none of us is God. And when it comes to that last situation, it's not so hypothetical. God did come to Earth and he did pick a dozen men to witness what he did and said, and they did go on to tell other people about this God. But the men God picked were not the kind of guys that you or I would likely pick. And that's another thing about Jesus that is stunning.

Today, we're continuing our series through the Gospel of Luke, and we're going to focus only on five verses. In these verses, we see that Jesus, who is still toward the beginning of his public ministry, is going pray and then choose twelve men out of his larger number of followers to be his apostles, his specially-commissioned messengers. And, suffice it to say, the twelve men are not the most powerful, most influential, or even the smartest men there are. But God knows what he's doing, and he has a surprising way of doing things.

So, without further ado, let's read Luke 6:12-16:

<sup>12</sup> In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. <sup>13</sup> And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles: <sup>14</sup> Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, <sup>15</sup> and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was

called the Zealot,<sup>16</sup> and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.<sup>1</sup>

This passage is short, and if you don't know who Jesus is and what he came to do, you wouldn't understand the significance of this passage. So, I'll give us some context.

We've already seen in Luke's Gospel that Jesus is unique. He is no ordinary man. He had a conception unlike anyone: he was conceived in a virgin, without sex. Miraculously, the Holy Spirit caused Mary to be pregnant. And even before that time, we have strong clues that Jesus won't simply be a miraculously-conceived man. The angel Gabriel told Mary, "the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). And even before this, the prophet Isaiah foretold of a time when it would be announced, "For unto us a child is born . . . and his name shall be called . . . Mighty God" (Isa. 9:6). How could a child be born who is called "Mighty God"? How can God be born a child?

Well, that's one of the greatest claims that Christianity makes. Jesus is the Son of God, who has always existed, through whom God the Father created the universe. And over two thousand years ago, during the reign of Caesar Augustus, the Son of God became a human being, first as an embryo, then a baby, then a child, then a man. And he did this without ceasing to be God. It's a bit hard to grasp that Jesus is both God and man. We say that he's one person with two natures, one divine and one human. This is one of the hardest things about Christianity to grasp, along with the Trinity. Just as we believe that there is one God in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—we believe that Jesus is both God and man.

We believe that because it's revealed in the Bible, and we believe that the Bible is God's written word. Already in the Gospel of Luke, we've had some hints that Jesus is God. Gabriel said he was the Son of God, and Jesus claims to forgive sins—sins that were not committed directly against the man Jesus. When Jesus makes this claim, some of the religious leaders of his day, the Pharisees, ask, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Luke 5:21). And that's the point; Jesus is God. We'll get other hints as we go through Luke. One of the clearest passages in Scripture that says that Jesus is God is the beginning of John's Gospel, which says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The "Word" here is the Son of God, Jesus. And he is somehow both with God and is God. He is God—the Son of God—and he was with the Father from what is known as eternity past.

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

What's interesting here is that Jesus prays to God—to God the Father, more specifically—before he chooses twelve men who will serve as his apostles. We may wonder why Jesus has to pray at all. If he's God, can't he just go ahead and pick these men? Doesn't he know who he's supposed to choose? And even if he has to pray, why does he pray all through the night?

The answer is that though Jesus is God, he lived his life primarily as a man. He never stopped being God, but he didn't rely on his divine attributes to go through life. Every once in a while, he could call on his divine powers to heal and to forgive and to know things that ordinary people don't know. But most of the time, he lived as a man, using the same resources that are available to us all, things like reading Scripture and praying. The reason why Jesus became a man was to fulfill God's design for humanity. He came to live the perfect human life, because no one else has. We were made to love God and represent him and worship him and obey him. But we don't do any of these things well or often, and certainly not perfectly. So, Jesus comes to live the perfect human life, to be the true image of God. That's one of the reasons why he came.

Jesus came to do the will of his Father (John 6:38). The man Jesus relied completely on the Father during his time on Earth. As the perfectly obedient Son of God, Jesus spent time with his Father in prayer. When he was about to do something important, he prayed. The man Jesus wanted to talk to God the Father. He wanted to know the Father's will.

So, we see Jesus praying on a mountain all through the night. Perhaps he went up a mountain simply to get away from the crowds that were following him. Perhaps we're supposed to see echoes of Moses meeting with God on Mount Sinai. But the important thing is Jesus is praying before making an important decision. He's about to choose twelve men who will be spend the next two or three years with him, men who will go on to tell the world about Jesus. To but it bluntly, Jesus couldn't afford to screw this choice up. He had to get the right men, the ones God wanted.

So, Jesus prays throughout the night. And when it was day, Jesus calls his disciples to himself. This must be a larger group of Jesus' followers. Literally, a disciple is a student. There were people who wanted to learn from Jesus. And out of this larger group of people, Jesus chooses twelve men, whom he named apostles.

The word apostle means someone who is sent, usually to be a messenger. The apostles are later said to be people who were with Jesus the whole time of his public ministry and who

saw him after he later rose from the grave (Acts 1:21–22). Jesus’ life, his miracles, his teachings, and, later, his death and resurrection are so important that there must be witnesses, people who could go to the world and tell what they saw Jesus do.

Before we look at who these men are, we should ask an important question: why twelve? Why does Jesus choose twelve? Why not ten or fifteen? Jesus chooses twelve apostles to represent the twelve tribes of Israel. We know that because toward the end of Luke’s Gospel, he’ll say this to his disciples:

<sup>28</sup> You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, <sup>29</sup> and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, <sup>30</sup> that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:28–30).

Jesus is restoring, renewing, and recreating Israel, the people of God. This reminds us slightly of the book of Numbers, when Moses and Israel were still at Sinai. At Mount Sinai, God told Moses to take a census of the people of Israel. God told Moses that he would be assisted by one man from every tribe (Num. 1:1–44). Something similar is happening here. That’s why at the beginning of the book of Acts, when there are only eleven apostles, they must name a twelfth apostle. Jesus is rebuilding Israel. He will use these unlikely men to gather the true Israel, the people of faith.

Now, let’s take a look at who these apostles are. We’ve already met some of them in Luke 5. The list begins with four fishermen. Simon is better known as Peter, a name that Jesus gives him. He is the leader of the group. He’s often bold, even acting rashly. When Jesus is later arrested, he takes a sword and cuts off a soldier’s ear (John 18:10). Yet after that bold move, he is cowardly and denies knowing Jesus so he can save his life (Luke 22:54–62).

Simon’s brother, Andrew, is not as prominent among the disciples. He was one of Jesus’ earliest followers. In John’s Gospel, we see that he introduced Simon to Jesus (John 1:40–42). That’s when Jesus gives Simon the name Peter, which means “rock.”

The next two disciples are another pair of brothers and fishermen, James and John. They were partners with Peter and Andrew. It’s possible that they were cousins of Jesus (compare John 19:25 with Matt. 27:56 and Mark 15:40).<sup>2</sup> James and John were part of the inner circle of disciples, along with Peter. John is the “disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23; 19:26; 21:7,

---

<sup>2</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, vol. 1, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 544. Bock asserts that they are cousins, though I don’t think this as clear as he insists.

20), the one who wrote the Gospel of John and John's letters and the book of Revelation. James and John were known as the "sons of thunder," probably because of episodes like one we'll see later in Luke. This is Luke 9:51–54:

<sup>51</sup> When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. <sup>52</sup> And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. <sup>53</sup> But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. <sup>54</sup> And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

Jewish people looked down on Samaritans. Add to that the fact that the people in this village didn't receive Jesus, and you can see why James and John might be a bit put out. They were probably thinking of the good old days of the prophet Elijah, when he would call fire to come down from heaven to consume God's enemies (see 1 Kgs. 18:20–40; 2 Kgs. 1). But Jesus rebukes them (verse 55).

We don't know a lot about the next disciples. Philip was from Bethsaida, just like Peter and the other fishermen. He invited his friend Nathaniel to meet Jesus (John 1:45–46). Bartholomew is probably the same man as Nathaniel, since we only read about Nathaniel in John's Gospel and Bartholomew appears in the other Gospels.

Matthew is the same person as Levi, the tax collector we met in Luke 5:27–32. Tax collectors were known as traitors since they served the Roman Empire, the superpower of the day that had power of Israel. They were also known as being dishonest.

Thomas is most famous for doubting that Jesus rose from the grave (John 20:24–25). But when he saw the risen Jesus, he made the great confession, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). He had also said he was willing to die with Jesus (John 11:16).

We know very little about James the Son of Alphaeus. The same is true of Simon, who was also called the Zealot. Some have assumed that he was a revolutionary, part of a group of people who were against the Roman Empire. But this group of Zealots didn't emerge until a few decades later and it's just as possible that Simon was zealous for the Jewish law. We also don't know much about Judas the son of James. He's called Thaddeus by Matthew and Mark (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18). John simply refers to him as "Judas (not Iscariot)" so we don't confuse him with the more famous Judas (John 14:22).

And that brings us to Judas Iscariot. He was the treasurer of the apostles, handling their money. But we're told by John that he helped himself to that money (John 12:4–6). Judas is infamous for betraying Jesus, telling the Jewish religious leaders who hated Jesus how they could arrest him away from the crowds. That's why Luke says that Judas "became a traitor." Jesus' arrest led to his trial and death. After Judas had realized what he did, he regretted his actions and gave back the money that he was paid to betray Jesus. But he couldn't live with what he did, so he hanged himself (Matt. 27:3–10).

These are the men that God led Jesus to choose. There were no Bible scholars, no religious leaders, no politicians, no particularly wealthy men in the bunch. In most ways, these men were thoroughly unimpressive.

So, why does God choose these men? We're never told explicitly. But the Bible states that God does as he pleases, that his will is perfect, and that he governs everything that happens. So, we trust he has good reasons for what he does.

We also know something else: God often chooses the weak to shame the strong and the foolish (in the world's eyes) to shame those who are supposedly wise.

Consider this passage by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:18–31:

<sup>18</sup> For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup> For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

<sup>20</sup> Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

<sup>26</sup> For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and

sanctification and redemption,<sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Paul is saying that God is truly wise, but God’s perfect wisdom is not what the world regards as wise. In the eyes of most people, what God does doesn’t make sense. At the time of Jesus, it didn’t make sense that God would become man and die on a cross. That’s because Jews knew that those who died in that way were cursed by God. Gentiles knew the cross was for enemies of the state, and the whole idea that there’s one true God who became man, died, and rose from the grave didn’t make sense to them.

But God truly knows what he’s doing. Paul says that Jews demand signs, or miracles. What greater miracle is there than for God to become man and then rise from the grave after dying? Paul says Greeks seek wisdom. What wiser way to take care of the problem of sin, our rebellion against God, than for Jesus to bear that sin himself, absorbing the punishment that we deserve, so that all who are united to him can be forgiven?

God shows his wisdom by using unlikely people, the average person, the weak, the poor. God doesn’t need to use the powerful, the rich, the smartest guys in the room. That’s because God has infinite power, and he can do what he wants in spite of our limitations. If God were picking a team, he might pick all the chubby kids with two left feet. He does this so that he can take all the credit for his works. We cannot boast because God is the hero of the story. We are only recipients of God’s grace.

The fact that God used very ordinary men to build the church is something of a miracle. In fact, we might even say it’s proof that Christianity is the true religion. I’m taking a course on apologetics now. Apologetics is basically the study of why Christianity is true. The word comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which can mean “defense” or “reason.” The idea comes from 1 Peter 3:15, which says, “but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.” The word *reason* is a translation of *apologia*.

At any rate, I’ve been studying apologetics, including the history of how people have defended the faith against objections and how they have given reasons why people should put their trust in Jesus. And some of the older apologists said that the truth of Christianity is demonstrated by the fact that God grew the church out of a small group of common men. This is what one preacher, John Chrysostom (c. 349–407), said

How many did the Church win over? Not two, or ten, or twenty, or a hundred, but almost every man living under the sun. With whose help did it win them over? With the help of eleven men. And these men were unlettered, ignorant, ineloquent, undistinguished, and poor. They could not rely on the fame of their homelands, on any abundance of wealth, or strength of body, or glorious reputation, or illustrious ancestry. They were neither forceful nor clever in speech; they could make no parade of knowledge. They were fishermen and tentmakers, men of a foreign tongue. They did not speak the same language as those whom they won over to the faith. Their speech—I mean Hebrew—was strange and different from all others. But it was with the help of these men that Christ founded this Church which reaches from one end of the world to the other.<sup>3</sup>

The point is that unless God were working through these ordinary men, there's no way a new religious movement could have spread throughout the world. These men didn't have any political power or wealth. Judaism was tolerated by the Roman Empire, but Christianity was something new, something not protected by law. To say that Jesus is Lord is to say that Caesar, the emperor, is not. This challenged the Roman Empire. Christians refused to bow down to the emperor and worship him or any of the other false gods in the Empire. To become a Christian was to go against Rome and the old order of Judaism. You wouldn't do this, and you wouldn't succeed if you did, unless God were behind it.

What's amazing is that Jesus doesn't just choose some ordinary men. He chooses a man who will be a traitor. The fact that Judas sold Jesus out wasn't something that surprised God. God knew this all along. He always knows everything. Yet God chose Judas. I suppose someone had to betray Jesus so that he would die. One of the things the Bible says is that God has a plan for everything and that people are responsible for their actions. We see this most clearly at the cross (Acts 2:23; 4:27–28). The fact that Judas was chosen was not an accident. Judas was responsible for his sin, but he was part of God's plan.

And Jesus' death was not an accident. Yes, people didn't believe him and hated him, and that's part of why he died. But ultimately, Jesus' death was God's plan to rescue his people from their sin. Earlier I said that Jesus came in part to live a perfect life, thus fulfilling God's plans for humanity. The other reason why he came was to pay the penalty for our sin. Our sin is so offensive to God and so destructive to his creation that he must remove it. God is a perfect judge

---

<sup>3</sup> John Chrysostom, *A Demonstration against the Pagans that Christ Is God* 12.9, in William Edgar and K. Scott Oliphint, eds., *Christian Apologetics Past and Present: A Primary Source Reader, to 1500*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 199.

who sees all the evidence, and he must punish sin. Jesus' death is the way that God punishes sins without destroying sinners.

Jesus prayed before choosing his disciples. He prayed before Peter made the great confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (Luke 9:18–20). He prayed before he was transfigured, revealing his divine glory to Peter, James, and John (Luke 9:28–29). And he wrestled in prayer on the night he was arrested, the night before he died, because he knew that he was about to experience hell on earth (Luke 22:39–46). Jesus prayed for our benefit. And he still prays for us. He came and lived the perfect life for us and he died for us. If you put your trust in Jesus, you are freed from condemnation and the fear of death, you are forgiven, and you are a child of God.

So, what do we do with this passage? I think we should see a few things.

One, the fact that Jesus chooses the weak and the poor and the foolish should give us hope. We don't have to be the world's smartest, most powerful, and most talented people in order to know God. What we really need is to realize our need for salvation. When we realize our spiritual poverty and weakness, we're in a place where we can come to Jesus. God chose twelve foolish men to be Jesus' disciple, and God chose a vast amount of foolish people to be Christians. That may injure our pride, but it should give us hope.

Two, the fact that the disciples often made mistakes after Jesus called them should give us hope. Even Peter, who denied knowing Jesus, was forgiven. I think it's possible that even Judas could have been forgiven, but he didn't understand that. The difference between Judas and Peter is that one couldn't see any hope. No matter what we've done, we can run to Jesus for forgiveness.

Three, Jesus prayed. He regularly spent time with his Father in heaven. And we should pray like Jesus. But we should remember that when we pray, God may not give us what we want. God doesn't always give us easy answers. But he always gives us what we need. Remember, God led Jesus to pick Judas. Jesus had to go through great pain and suffering. If we trust Jesus, we don't have to experience the punishment that he endured on the cross. But we may experience quite a bit of pain and suffering. Yet whatever trials we face are for our good and they are not the final chapter in the story. The final chapter for God's people is eternal life in a restored, renewed, recreated world, a life in Paradise with God.

So, let us be thankful. Let us boast in Jesus and trust in him. And let us pray like him.