

July 7-11, 2025 Edition

Following

The Year^(s) Of Jesus Part 183

Disciples ~ Apostles ~ & Us
Masterpieces In Name & Purpose

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we're going to spend some time looking at Jesus' calling of the 12 apostles- what that meant for them and what it means for you and me. Now if you follow these reflections with any kind of regularity then you have probably noticed I've been doing an awful lot of recycling of old reflections over the last several months. In fact I'm guessing this is the first time I've done "fresh" reflections in 8 months or more. It's been a challenging time for my family and for Riverside but I'm starting to see some light at the end of the tunnel. Will it be the end of the tunnel or a speeding train? I'm hopeful it'll be the former but if I've learned anything over the last 5 1/2 years it's that you can never be sure. I do know I'm feeling better than I have in months and so is Judy so if you've been praying for us then let me say, "thank you- you have no idea how much that means to us." Please keep the prayers coming- they're important.

Alright enough about me and Judy for now- let's pick up the chronological story of Jesus' life just after the one year mark. Here's what's going on at that point for Jesus and His disciples: He has just finished the Sermon On The Mount and is almost assuredly at the high point of His popularity in Israel. Soon He will lose most of that popularity and most of His disciples will abandon Him but at this point multitudes are coming to Him to be taught, healed, fed & cared for by the most famous Rabbi in all of Israel. Jesus can't do it all by Himself so He appoints 12 of His disciples to become His apostles:

Jesus went up on a mountain and called out the ones he wanted to go with him. And they came to him. Then he appointed twelve of them and named them his apostles. Mark 3:13-14 (NLT)

So the natural question is, what is an apostle? Well to understand that we need to talk about what a disciple is and to understand that we kind of need to look at the educational structure of ancient Israel. When a child turned 6 his parents would take him to the local synagogue where the Jews worshipped on the Sabbath and where teaching would take place all week long. In some areas of first century Israel girls were included in the training and in some they weren't- I guess Judaism had a wide variety of synagogues that had different views on such things just like Christianity has some churches where women participate in leadership and worship services and some where they don't.

The name of the school that 6-10 year olds attended was Bet Sefer (which means house of bread). Anytime you see the prefix "bet" in Hebrew it means "house of". Jesus was born in Bet-lehem which means "house of bread" (which means that the Bread of Life was born in the house of bread and we'll dig into that much more deeply when we get to Jesus feeding the 5,000). That has almost nothing to do with this reflection but I find it interesting so guess what- you get to hear about it today too.

Anyways the curriculum at Bet Sefer was the first 5 books of the Old Testament. This part of the scriptures was referred to as the Torah by the Jews and basically was the law or instruction for living that God gave Israel through Moses. When a child finished Bet Sefer he was expected to have the entire Torah memorized. That's 187 chapters. That's 79,976 words that a 10 year old was expected to have committed to memory. I don't know what kind of final exam you had to pass to go from elementary school to middle school but I'm going to go out on a limb and say it wasn't anything like what these Jewish 10 year olds were subjected to.

When a child turned 10 the best of the best went on to the next level of education (Bet Talmud which means house of study) and the rest (the majority actually didn't make the grade) went home to learn their father's trade. Most scholars don't believe that any of Jesus' apostles made it past Bet Sefer- they all got sent home to learn to be fishermen/craftsman/tradesman.

But the cream of the crop went on to Bet Talmud and there they learned the entire rest of the Old Testament- historical books, prophetic books, poetic books and wisdom literature. By the time these kids reached the age of 14 they were expected to have the entire Old Testament memorized and ready to recall any part of it at a moments notice. Tomorrow we'll look at the next phase of education (which is where the whole disciple part of the process comes into play) but for today maybe spend some time thinking about what the benefit of having the scriptures memorized might be- and what the drawback of having the entire scriptures memorized might be. I'll leave you with Deuteronomy 6 to reflect on as well:

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:6-9 (NIV)

Tuesday Reflection: Yesterday we looked at the first 2 components of the Jewish educational system in Jesus' day- Bet Sefer (house of the book) and Bet Talmud (house of study). Children graduated from Bet Sefer when they were 10 years old and they graduated from Bet Talmud at 14 years of age. Most of the students went home after they graduated from Bet Talmud but for the cream of the crop- the best of the best of the best- there was one more level of training to go through- Bet Midrash (house of learning). Bet Midrash was not run by local Jewish elders like Bet Sefer/Talmud though- it was run by traveling Rabbis.

If a young man wanted to continue his learning he would apply to a Rabbi that he admired and respected in hopes the Rabbi would accept him into his traveling college. The admission tests were nuts! A Rabbi might ask a prospective student how many times the word "wilderness" was used in the first two books of the Torah and the student better be ready with the right answer or they were turned away. If after a series of questions the student seemed to have the proper foundation for learning from a particular Rabbi then the questions would change to test for an understanding of the scriptures rather than just an encyclopedic knowledge of them.

The Rabbi might ask the student what he thought of a particular verse but the student would know that the Rabbi wasn't actually interested in the verse he quoted to the student but rather the verse immediately before or after the quoted scripture. The student would be expected to reply with a verse that answered the Rabbi's question but rather than quoting the verse that answered the Rabbi's question the student would quote the verse immediately before or after the verse that the student thought would answer the Rabbi's question. Are you confused yet? Yeah, me too. My brain hurts just thinking about it.

But if a student was accepted into the Rabbi's Bet Midrash then he became a disciple and would the Rabbi would say, "follow me." It would have been the single most important

moment in a Jewish boys life. Every mom and dad dreamed that their son would become a disciple. Not many did but it was the dream. As a disciple the young man would be expected to take on his Rabbi's "yoke". A Rabbi's yoke was the unique take on the Torah that each Rabbi had. So when we read these words of Jesus maybe they take on a new meaning for some of us:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV)

Those words of Jesus are unique because there is no crazy quiz or test that Jesus' disciples must pass to be "worthy". All you have to do to become a disciple of the greatest Rabbi who has ever lived is simple "come". He doesn't reject anyone. He provides the training. He provides the example. And His yoke is easy. What does that even mean? Something for both of us to ponder until we look tomorrow at what an apostle is.

Wednesday Reflection: Ok so we know what a disciple is now- someone who follows his/her Rabbi so completely it is their dream to become exactly like their Rabbi. That's what Jesus invites all of us too. Yes- even you. Yes- even me. Yes- even the people that bug you the most and you think shouldn't be included in Jesus' "call". But what is an apostle?

Apostle means "sent one". It was a word that first century Israelites knew well- if someone called you an apostle it meant you were being sent with an important message by an important person. Jesus had thousands of disciples at this point in His ministry but He only chose 12 men to be His apostles:

Jesus went up on a mountain and called out the ones he wanted to go with him. And they came to him. Then he appointed twelve of them and named them his apostles. Mark 3:13-14 (NLT)

What's mind boggling is this- the men chosen to be Jesus' apostles hadn't yet mastered the material that they were learning. These guys weren't just rough around the edges- they were rough through and through. And yet, Jesus chose them. Ever wonder why? Because the pickings were slim. And because Jesus has the unique capacity to create in us what isn't there yet but could be if we'd submit to His apprenticeship program. There are two words that are kind of important in the verse we just read- one is "appointed" and the other is "named". Let's start with talking about what appointed means.

I always thought it was just a formality of telling the 12 (and eventually everyone else) that they were now apostles. But it's WAY more than that. The word Mark uses here is *poy-yeh-oh*. It is translated here into English as "appointed" but this word is almost always translated into English as "made". It was a word in Greek that was often used to describe an artist making or creating something useful or beautiful with lumps of raw material. I know I told this story at church last weekend but it's the best way to describe what I think Mark is wanting us to understand about what Jesus did here with these 12 lumps or raw material (because they weren't apostle material yet- Jesus would have to shape them and form them to make that a reality).

Most of us have heard of Michelangelo's most famous sculpture- the David. I didn't know this but Michelangelo wasn't the first artist commissioned to sculpt the David. There was a church in Florence that was going to put giant statues of Old Testament figures up on the roof and in 1465 they commissioned Agostino di Duccio (the most famous sculptor of the day) to create the David from an incredibly expensive piece of Carrerra marble. Duccio began on the piece but hadn't done much more than the feet and the bottom part of the legs when he noticed a huge imperfection that had been hidden within the block of marble- a crack that he couldn't see any way to work around. He gave up and told the Florence town fathers that nobody could work around that crack- eventually as the piece was sculpted it would split into two (or more) pieces. The block sat unfinished in a Florence scrapyard until the project was attempted again 10 years later by Antonio Rossellino (another famous sculptor of the day) but even Rossellino gave up soon after taking a hammer and chisel to the piece.

Then in 1501 a young Michelangelo was asked to look at the piece of marble. He was warned it was impossible to do anything with that block of marble but as he walked around the lump of raw material he said, "I will turn this imperfect block of marble into King David..." and when he was asked why he would risk failing on such a large scale he said, "because I see a masterpiece within this block of marble... and I have to let it out."

If you were writing this story in Greek it would be plausible to say, "Michelangelo appointed the block of marble to become the David." What Mark is telling us when he says that Jesus "appointed" these 12 to be His apostles is that the men He chose weren't perfect examples of what an apostle should be- but that He saw within them a masterpiece (in spite of all the flaws that were there whether anyone could see them or not) and He wanted to let it out.

Isn't that cool? He sees similar greatness in you and me. He has "appointed" us to become like Him and even if that was all there was in this verse that was worth looking at it would be a really cool story. BUT WAIT! THERE'S MORE!

Mark then says that Jesus "named" them His apostles. What does that mean? Well, naming things in the ancient world was a powerful thing. People would name things to describe what they saw in a person or thing but sometimes they would name things or people trying to be prophetic and cause a desired outcome because of what they named things or people. We do this all the time. Mostly in the modern world we name things to describe what we already see but sometimes we'll try to be prophetic in what we name things or people.

I heard a story once about a woman who became Miss America. She was from some midwestern town and her father had owned a market. She said every week the guy who delivered the milk would come into the store and ruffle her hair and say, "how's my little Miss America doing today?" She said that motivated her to become Miss America someday and the prophetic utterance of a milk man changed her life forever. I liked that idea so when Jonathan was pretty young I would walk up, ruffle his hair and say, "how's my little Mr. Multi-Millionaire doing today?" So far my ability to name things prophetically and change people or things based on what I call them is pretty shabby. That's true for most of us.

But not Jesus. When He names someone or something prophetically that thing or person begins the inevitable process of becoming whatever He named them. Here we learn that

Jesus "appointed" (began the creative process of making something useful/beautiful out of lumps of raw material) 12 of His disciples and "named" them to be His apostles.

And that's exactly what happened. They didn't look like much when Jesus appointed and named them but if you look at the end result you have to just stand there with your mouth hanging open in shock and wonder.

Tomorrow we'll look at what all of this has to do with you and me but for today maybe spend some time thinking about what Jesus might have appointed and named you to be. You might not think you look like much or are worth much right now but what Jesus appoints and names eventually becomes exactly what He says it is.

Thursday Reflection:

When Jesus was leaving, he saw a man named Matthew sitting in the tax collector's booth. Jesus said to him, "Follow me," and he stood up and followed Jesus. Matthew 9:9 (NLT)

Reflection: Ok... so let's say I choose to follow Jesus. What will that really look like? What will that mean? Great question. One that I can't really answer.

Think about it this way... what would you read if you asked a 7 year old to write an essay describing what a loving marriage relationship would look like for them in 20 years... 30 years... 40 years...

Can you imagine what you'd be reading? They couldn't possibly give you a good answer because at that age they couldn't possibly understand all the nuances of love and relationships.

You and I are at least that far away from understanding what life as a disciple of Jesus is going to look like. How could we possibly understand all the nuances of how Jesus' way of life is going to change ours as we try to live the way He lived. Try to treat people the way He treated people. Try to see God the way He saw His Father.

I have to be honest... my life with God looks NOTHING like I thought it would look. Even after all these years doing my best (some days more successfully than others) to follow Him I am constantly mystified and confused by my relationship with God just as much if not more than I am in my relationship with my wonderfully complex wife, Judy.

But as I keep moving forward with Him (and with her) I find new vistas opened to me that I never even knew existed. When it comes to discipleship and what it looks like to me maybe it's best if I just leave you with a story... this is a short explanation of a book by George MacDonald written 150 years ago called *The Princess & The Goblin*.

Once upon a time there was a young princess named Irene. She lived in a wonderful house not far from a cave where some very nasty goblins lived. She tried not to worry about the goblins and this was easier on the days she got to spend with her wonderfully wise grandmother who sometimes she found in her attic. Over the years her grandmother taught her many things about how to be a very wise little girl.

One day Irene's grandmother gave her a present. It was a ring. She told Irene that there was a thread tied to the ring... a thread that ran from the ring to a ball of thread that

grandmother herself would always have with her. "If you ever find yourself in trouble, or scared, or not knowing what to do, Irene, just follow the thread".

Irene knew that if she followed the thread she would find grandmother. That night she heard the goblins in her house. She took off the ring and put it under her pillow and followed the thread to get to grandmother. But the thread didn't take her up in the attic like she expected... it took her out of her house and into some very nasty, scary, dangerous places.

She hesitated but decided that she trusted grandmother so she would trust the thread and follow it. But she was surprised once again when the thread led her to the goblin cave.

"Surely grandmother doesn't want me to go in the cave of the goblins," Irene thought. But since that is where the thread was leading Irene decided to trust it. Into the cave she went. The thread disappeared at an apparent dead end. It went right into a huge pile of rocks that blocked the entire back part of the cave.

So Irene started pulling at the rocks. Grandmother must have a reason for me to go through the rocks she reasoned. As she worked her fingers bled and dust got in her eyes and she was very afraid the goblins would return and find her. But she kept following the thread.

As the rocks started opening up to reveal a passage she saw something familiar... her friend, Curdie, who had disappeared a week earlier. "This is why grandmother wanted me to go this way" Irene realized...

Once she had freed him, Curdie was ready to get out of that cave. The only problem was... grandmother's thread was leading Irene deeper into the cave. Irene told Curdie, "I know you want to leave... and so do I. But if I had doubted grandmother's thread before this I never would have found you and you'd still be tied up. We must trust the thread".

And so further into the cave they went...

Want to know how it ends? Buy the book ;o) If you're a parent read the book to your kids. When they ask what following Jesus will look like you'll have a common language and you'll be able to answer very simply. Following Jesus means trusting and following the thread.

So trust the thread.

Prayer: Father, teach me to see and feel Your thread in my life. I want to follow You... show me how to do that. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Friday Reflection: Friday Reflection: The following is from Max Lucado's book, In The Grip Of Grace, that I share in these reflections about once a year. In the first century there were many different factions of Judaism. The same could be said of modern American Christianity. So many flavors. Who's right? Who's wrong? What does Jesus think of all of this? Max Lucado helped me see things in a much different way than I was told growing up.

Life Aboard The Fellow-Ship:

God has enlisted us in his navy and placed us on his ship. The boat has one purpose—to carry us safely to the other shore.

This is no cruise ship; it's a battleship. We aren't called to a life of leisure; we are called to a life of service. Each of us has a different task. Some, concerned with those who are drowning, are snatching people from the water. Others are occupied with the enemy, so they man the cannons of prayer and worship. Still others devote themselves to the crew, feeding and training the crew members.

Though different, we are the same. Each can tell of a personal encounter with the captain, for each has received a personal call. He found us among the shanties of the seaport and invited us to follow him. Our faith was born at the sight of his fondness, and so we went.

We each followed him across the gangplank of his grace onto the same boat. There is one captain and one destination. Though the battle is fierce, the boat is safe, for our captain is God. The ship will not sink. For that, there is no concern.

There is concern, however, regarding the disharmony of the crew. When we first boarded we assumed the crew was made up of others like us. But as we've wandered these decks, we've encountered curious converts with curious appearances. Some wear uniforms we've never seen, sporting styles we've never witnessed. "Why do you look the way you do?" we ask them.

"Funny," they reply. "We were about to ask the same of you."

The variety of dress is not nearly as disturbing as the plethora of opinions. There is a group, for example, who clusters every morning for serious study. They promote rigid discipline and somber expressions. "Serving the captain is serious business," they explain. It's no coincidence that they tend to congregate around the stern.

There is another regiment deeply devoted to prayer. Not only do they believe in prayer, they believe in prayer by kneeling. For that reason you always know where to locate them; they are at the bow of the ship.

And then there are a few who staunchly believe real wine should be used in the Lord's Supper. You'll find them on the port side.

Still another group has positioned themselves near the engine. They spend hours examining the nuts and bolts of the boat. They've been known to go below deck and not come up for days. They are occasionally criticized by those who linger on the top deck, feeling the wind in their hair and the sun on their face. "It's not what you learn," those topside argue. "It's what you feel that matters."

And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

Some think once you're on the boat, you can't get off. Others say you'd be foolish to go overboard, but the choice is yours.

Some believe you volunteer for service; others believe you were destined for the service before the ship was even built.

Some predict a storm of great tribulation will strike before we dock; others say it won't hit until we are safely ashore.

There are those who speak to the captain in a personal language. There are those who think such languages are extinct.

There are those who think the officers should wear robes, there are those who think there should be no officers at all, and there are those who think we are all officers and should all wear robes.

And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

And then there is the issue of the weekly meeting at which the captain is thanked and his words are read. All agree on its importance, but few agree on its nature. Some want it loud, others quiet. Some want ritual, others spontaneity. Some want to celebrate so they can meditate; others meditate so they can celebrate. Some want a meeting for those who've gone overboard. Others want to reach those overboard but without going overboard and neglecting those on board.

And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

The consequence is a rocky boat. There is trouble on deck. Fights have broken out. Sailors have refused to speak to each other. There have even been times when one group refused to acknowledge the presence of others on the ship. Most tragically, some adrift at sea have chosen not to board the boat because of the quarreling of the sailors.

"What do we do?" we'd like to ask the captain. "How can there be harmony on the ship?" We don't have to go far to find the answer.

On the last night of his life Jesus prayed a prayer that stands as a citadel for all Christians:

I pray for these followers, but I am also praying for all those who will believe in me because of their teaching. Father, I pray that they can be one. As you are in me and I am in you, I pray that they can also be one in us. Then the world will believe that you sent me. (John 17:20)

How precious are these words. Jesus, knowing the end is near, prays one final time for his followers. Striking, isn't it, that he prayed not for their success, their safety, or their happiness. He prayed for their unity. He prayed that they would love each other.

As he prayed for them, he also prayed for "those who will believe because of their teaching." That means us! In his last prayer Jesus prayed that you and I (and every other believer on the planet) be one.

Prayer: Father, forgive me for the times I've clustered with those who are like me while being suspicious of those who aren't. Show me how to live in unity with others who follow You. In Jesus' Name, amen.