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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

UNIT 7: THE DISCIPLES ARE CALLED

After enduring the temptations in the wilderness, the gospels tell us that Jesus began to preach and to attract many followers from whom he selected his twelve disciples. We will discuss many of these individuals as we progress through this course, but in this unit we will look closely at the event – or events – of their calling.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

We tend to think of Jesus and his work as being entirely unique, but while it certainly was unique in many ways, Jesus shared many similarities with other teachers of his time. In Judaism of the first century many rabbis or teachers taught students and trained them to be rabbis like themselves – both to assist them and to carry on their teaching and work. The major difference was that young men wanting to be taught in this way usually sought out a teacher. Jesus, on the other hand, directly called his students himself (see Note 1) – something he stressed in his teaching (John 15:16).

But apart from this aspect of student selection, Jesus' role as a rabbi or teacher was not unusual for its time. It is worth remembering that most students selected by rabbis were young – commonly in their later teens. It is perfectly possible, therefore, that a number of Jesus' disciples were younger than we usually presume, and there is some biblical indication that this might have been the case. The apostle John is known to have lived till very late in the first century, but while he was perhaps the youngest of the twelve disciples of Jesus, we should remember that the other disciples seem to have been martyred earlier in the century – very possibly well before they would normally have died.

Also, the interesting story regarding the occasion when Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum and the collectors of the two-drachma temple tax came to Peter and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?" may shed light on the age of the disciples. We are told that Jesus instructed Peter to catch a fish – which miraculously had a four-drachma coin in its mouth – and to pay the tax for both Jesus and for himself (Matthew 17:24–27).

It might seem odd that Jesus only provided the money for Peter and himself and not for the other disciples – until we realize that the tax only had to be paid by those aged twenty and above. So it is possible that Peter alone of the disciples was older – a possibility which may explain why Peter seems always to be the one who speaks for the other disciples (Acts 2:14–36, etc.), why he is the only disciple said to be married at the time of Christ's ministry (Matthew 8:14–17, etc.) and why he was given such a prominent role among the other disciples and in the early church (Galatians 2:7–9).

Ultimately, the age of the disciples does not matter, or we would have been told what age they were. On the other hand, recognizing the possibility of the relative youth of many of Jesus' chosen followers can help us understand some things that might otherwise seem unclear as we read the gospels.

But returning to how individuals became students of a rabbi, it is helpful to remember that young men did not simply turn up at a rabbi's door and expect to be taught. There were relatively few rabbis and many young men. Those who sought out a rabbi to follow were examined and tested by the older teacher and only a select few were chosen. Being selected to follow a rabbi and to continue his teaching was viewed as an exceptional honor in that society – perhaps indicating why we are told that many of the disciples dropped everything they were doing and followed Jesus immediately (Matthew 4:18–22).

As his ministry progressed, many of Jesus's followers were called disciples (John 4:1; etc.), but he selected twelve of those individuals to be his disciples in the fullest sense – individuals who left their work and followed Jesus daily, interacting closely and being taught by him. For the Jewish people, the number twelve was highly significant. This number recalled the twelve tribes of Israel which were descended from the Patriarch Jacob's twelve sons. The number twelve was thus inextricably connected with the concept of Israel itself. By selecting twelve disciples from his numerous followers, Jesus was indicating that his teaching would be to all Israel and would be foundational to the renewed Israel foretold by the prophets (Ezekiel 25–48; etc.). These disciples, as their training progressed, became apostles – meaning “those who are sent” – and were eventually sent to the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 10:5–6; 19:28).

The Gospel of Matthew focuses on this important aspect of the disciples' calling by means of the literary technique called a *chiasm* or “crossing over” – by comparing what Jesus did with the mission he gave to the disciples (Matthew 9:35–10:8). Matthew shows that Jesus preached the gospel and healed the sick (9:35), seeing the need of the people who were like sheep without a shepherd (9:36) and in need of laborers to be “sent out” by God to help them (9:38). Matthew then skillfully reverses or “crosses” the items in this list by showing in reverse order that the disciples were sent out (10:5) to be “shepherds” to the lost sheep of Israel (10:6) and to preach and heal (10:7–8). He deftly inserts the list of the twelve disciples' names at the very center – the focal point – of this story of what Jesus did and what the disciples were called to do (10:2–4), showing the responsibility of these individuals for ministering to the tribes of Israel. Matthew also tells us that the eternal reward of these twelve would be exactly that:

Jesus said to them ... “when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” (Matthew 19:28)

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Each of the four gospels includes the calling of Jesus' first disciples, but it is often said that the gospels contradict each other regarding the calling of these disciples – that the Synoptic Gospels do not agree with each other, and that they all disagree with John. However, this is simply not true. The key to understanding their accounts is to read them in the context of all four gospels and to pay close attention to the details that are given. When we do this, we find that Peter, Andrew, James, and John already knew Jesus when they were formally called.

All three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 4:18–22; 10:2–4; Mark 1:16–20; 3:16–19; Luke 5:4–11; 6:13–16) have the calling of the first disciples as being in the same order: Peter, Andrew, James, John – except that Luke does not mention Andrew by name. John's Gospel (John 1:35–51), however, relates Jesus' encounter with these men in this order: Andrew and an unnamed man (almost certainly John himself), Simon Peter, Philip, and Nathanael (also called Bartholomew).

Combining all these accounts, we see that the first six disciples were Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, and Bartholomew. The different order found in John's Gospel is easily explained, as John describes the initial meeting of Jesus with Andrew, John, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael, while the Synoptics describe the actual calling of these men by Jesus somewhat later. So, for example, when the Synoptics tell us that Jesus called Peter while the latter was working, and Peter immediately left his nets and followed Jesus, he was not following a total stranger. Not only had Peter met Jesus before, but also Luke tells us that Jesus had healed Peter's mother-in-law (Luke 4:38–39) in his own house (see Note 2). The Synoptics do not claim that the event by the seashore was Jesus' first encounter with Peter and Andrew, only that it was there that their formal calling occurred. On the other hand, John's Gospel clearly indicates that it records the first meeting of Jesus with Peter and Andrew (John 1:40–42).

The Synoptics tell us that the tax collector Matthew (also called Levi) was called separately, sometime after the first six disciples (Matthew 9:9–13; Mark 2:13–17; Luke 5:27–32). But the gospels do not discuss the calling of the remaining five disciples; we are simply told that after a night of solitary prayer, Jesus officially named his twelve disciples, whom he chose from among his many followers. The three Synoptic Gospels all list the Twelve (Matthew 10, Mark 3, and Luke 6), and Matthew's list seems to follow the order of the calling of the individual disciples to at least some extent:

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| 1. Simon Peter | 7. Matthew (Levi) |
| 2. Andrew | 8. Thomas |
| 3. James the son of Zebedee | 9. James the son of Alphaeus |
| 4. John | 10. Judas (Thaddaeus) the son of James |
| 5. Philip | 11. Simon who was called "the Zealot" |
| 6. Nathanael (Bartholomew) | 12. Judas Iscariot. |

Once we see how the gospels are in harmony regarding the calling of the disciples, there are few potential difficulties with the verses that record these events. One passage that has puzzled some, however, is the section of John's Gospel that describes the calling of Nathanael or Bartholomew (the latter name being Aramaic for "Son of Ptolemy" and representing Nathanael's surname):

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel." (John 1:47–49)

Critics have claimed that Jesus simply having seen Nathanael under a fig tree when he was not aware of being seen would hardly have resulted in Nathanael declaring Jesus to be the Son of God. But clearly there was more involved in the situation, and Jesus was aware of some aspect of Nathanael being under the tree that would require supernatural knowledge. Many explanations have been given for this situation – usually that Nathanael had been praying under a fig tree in some private area, or (according to common Jewish interpretation) that he had been studying the Scriptures in such a location.

There is, however, a fascinating early Christian tradition preserved in the Syriac language that gives an entirely different explanation of Nathanael's surprise. It is said that Nathanael was the same age as Jesus, and when the infants under two years old were slain by the jealous Herod (Matthew 2:16–18), Nathanael's mother hid the infant under a fig tree by their home, and this was a fact that only the immediate family knew. Whatever Jesus' words referred to, they were clearly surprising enough that Nathanael was convicted by them to recognize Jesus not only as the "King of Israel," but also "the Son of God."

CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS:

The calling of the twelve disciples was not only a key episode in the life of Jesus, but also it was an event that involved a number of concepts and lessons for everyone who becomes a follower of the Son of God.

We have already commented that the special calling of twelve of Jesus' followers tied to the imagery of the twelve sons of Jacob who were the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. The calling of the twelve was in itself an announcement that Jesus was about to remake Israel in the manner described by the Old Testament prophets. But we should not let this fact give us an exclusive and limited view of Jesus' disciples. To return to the analogy of the descendants of Jacob/Israel, we should remember that Jacob also had at least one daughter, and although his sons were given the particular responsibility of being nominal heads of their respective tribes, the female descendants of Jacob also played an important role in the building of Israel.

In the same way, a number of women were part of the ministry of Jesus from the beginning – not just in supporting and assisting that ministry (Luke 8:2), but also in announcing and proclaiming the word. Mary, Elizabeth, the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well, Mary Magdalene, and others all had direct speaking roles in the original proclamation of the gospel message. Several women, such as Mary of Bethany and her sister Martha, studied at the feet of Christ along with the male disciples. This was in an era when no other rabbi would consider taking female students, so the involvement of women was a striking aspect of Jesus' teaching of disciples (see Note 3).

Another striking conceptual aspect of the calling of the first disciples is that Jesus called those disciples in pairs. We find Peter and his brother Andrew called together, James and his brother John, Philip and Nathanael, and so on. Even those who seem to have been called individually, like the tax collector Levi (Matthew), were soon paired with another disciple, and when Jesus eventually sent the disciples out to preach, he sent them out in these pairs (Mark 6:9; Luke 10:1). Two witnesses were required in Jewish law to substantiate any fact (Deuteronomy 19:15), and, of course, Jesus stressed that he would be with his followers in a particularly direct way wherever two or more are together (Matthew 18:20). This could be seen as a great waste of resources, as the disciples could have reached twice as many people if they had been sent out individually, but Jesus began the practice that we see continued in the book of Acts whereby the apostles were sent out and evangelized in pairs (Acts 13:2; etc.). This is not to minimize the individual aspects of each calling of Jesus' disciples then or now. It is clear that Peter's calling was not the same as that of Andrew, or John's calling as that of James. Jesus had different plans for each of those disciples, as the New Testament and history show, but his insistence on sending out the twelve two by two underscored for his disciples the communal aspect of our calling, which is the basis of all evangelism.

There is yet another aspect of the calling of Jesus' disciples that we should consider as having direct application to us today. It is common for Christians to think of the twelve disciples of Jesus to have been either particularly saintly people even at the time of their calling, or at the other extreme, for them to have been errant individuals who constantly made mistakes and exhibited all kinds of problems. The truth is doubtless somewhere between these two extremes. Certainly, the disciples were not natural "saints," and the gospels document many of their mistakes clearly enough. When he was called, Peter openly confessed "I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8), and we cannot read the stories of James and John wanting to bring fire down from heaven on people (Luke 9:54) or of the disciples arguing which of them would be greatest (Luke 22:24) without seeing their very evident human mistakes and weaknesses.

But on the other hand, the disciples were so much more than their mistakes. We should remember that Jesus prayed all night before selecting them, and that prayer doubtless did not lead to a group of evilly-

intentioned individuals being selected. Whatever their faults and sometimes their failures, the disciples were devout men. Both Andrew and John were already disciples of John the Baptist before they followed Jesus (John 1:35–46), and even the self-admitted “sinful man” Peter was not only acutely conscious of his own failings, but also repeatedly showed his dedication and desire to do what was right (John 13:9; etc.) and grew in his calling (see Note 4). Sometimes we may wonder why God called us or feel unworthy of our own calling, but it is nowhere truer than in the selection of those he calls that God looks on the heart rather than outward righteousness or the apparent lack of it. The twelve disciples Jesus selected were living testimonies to that fact, and what they were able to accomplish with the help of God can be an inspiration to us all despite our failings.

Finally, we should never forget the way in which the gospels show how highly the disciples valued their calling when they received it. Philip’s clear elation at meeting and following the Messiah (John 1:45) was doubtless typical. It is certain that the opportunity to become a disciple of Rabbi Jesus would have been regarded as a great honor and privilege in that society – to be one of so few selected from so many. Certainly, in terms of our own lives, it is also something of which we can remind ourselves: that our own calling is no less a privilege and just as much a cause for ongoing joy as that experienced by the first twelve to be called disciples.

* Note 1: The great rabbinical teacher Hillel (the grandfather of the Gamaliel who taught Paul) whose life overlapped that of Jesus (c. 110 BC- AD 10) is known to have selected his own disciples, but most rabbis taught those who came to them and who they felt would be good students.

* Note 2: In Luke 5:3, Jesus refers to Peter by the name of Simon (as he frequently did), and he was clearly the same Simon whose house Jesus had visited in 4:38 – otherwise Luke would have given him some distinction, such as Simon the fisherman, in order to clarify that it wasn't the same Simon mentioned a few verses earlier.

* Note 3: To see Jesus’ inclusion of women in historical perspective, we need only look at any of the many later teachings on the subject in the Jewish Talmud. For example: “One who excessively converses with a woman causes evil to himself, neglects the study of Torah, and, in the end, inherits purgatory” (Talmud: Mishna Avot 1).

* Note 4: We should remember that God does not rename people lightly – when he gives a person a new name it is not just a new designation, it is a new destiny. Just as Abram, the “father” became Abraham, the “father of nations,” so Simon *eventually* became Peter – a “rock” of stability. Note that even after renaming Simon, Jesus did not refer to him as Peter (except on a single occasion – Luke 22:34). Peter grew to become a “rock” in the church and is called by that name throughout Acts and in the epistles.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics: What New Testament story may indicate that the twelve disciples were relatively young?

Beneath the Surface: Jesus not only prayed in order to choose the very best people for the call he was to give them, but also had to pray to choose someone who would betray him. How does this principle of prayer aimed at God’s will apply in our lives in terms of our willingness to pray “hard” prayers as well as “easy ones”?

Everyday Applications: What does Jesus’ calling of disciples as different as Matthew (who was employed by the Romans) and Simon the Zealot (a group working actively against the Romans) teach us about our relationships with other believers?

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