

The Twelve: Lessons from the Lesser Knowns

Luke 6:14-16

April 2, 2017

Today, we're going to talk about some of the lesser known Apostles. I'm not sure if you're aware, but we started our study of the Apostles in the apostolic ministry back in January—end of January. And as we came in our study of Luke, we wanted to come to this portion here and pay special attention to this list of names the Lord chose to be his Apostles because as we've pointed out, these men are the very foundation of the Christian church that has existed now for two millennia, 2,000 years and counting. And it all started one night when Jesus, seeing the opposition of his own people, the Jews, and knowing the plan of the Father to reveal and unpack and unfold this mystery of the church that is Jew and Gentile together united in one body—it all started one night when Jesus was praying. Take a look at Luke 6:12: "In these days he [Jesus] went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when the day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named Apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew,

and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot, and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.”

In that list of the Twelve, we've spent several weeks on Peter. We skipped his poor brother Andrew, we'll get to him today. We spent a week on James and John last week, but today we're going to cover eight of these Apostles in a single message. Yes! Believe it or not, we are going to do that. By God's design and by his sovereign choice, he wanted us to cover Peter in a broader way. He wanted much more to be recorded about Peter than the other Apostles and then a lot less to be recorded about all the other Apostles. That was his choice. By his sovereign will he also chose to bring James, the brother of John, home to heaven a little bit early and to leave the younger brother John on the earth. In fact, it's owing to John's longevity in the ministry that we have anything at all written about the other Apostles. So apart from what John wrote, we're going to be spending a lot of time in his Gospel this morning. Apart from what he wrote, we really wouldn't have a sermon. We would just have to mention these names and move on.

Admittedly, there is not a lot written about the lesser-known Apostles in Scripture. There is a good portion in tradition, but it's hard to determine fact from fiction from what's received by us from the stories from the centuries. We're not going to speculate about these Apostles. We're not going to fill in all the white spaces because I think God has provided a number of important lessons for us to learn from what is written, plenty of encouragement to glean from what is actually recorded, and even some lessons from the fact that the Bible is relatively silent about most of these men. So as we get into this, look again at that list of names in Luke 6:14 to 16. You may remember how we noted that that list is organized basically into the same three groups. If you compare this list with what's recorded in Matthew, Mark and then Acts Chapter 1:13, you see the same list, you see the same groupings as well. The first group, the inner circle, is led by Peter, then Andrew, James and John. The second group is led by Philip, and it's followed by Bartholomew, Matthew and Thomas. Andrew seems to form a kind of bridge between the first and second groups as we see. Then there's a third group of Apostles: James the son of Alphaeus leads the list, then Simon the Zealot, Judas son of James and then Judas Iscariot. As I said, we're going to leave Judas Iscariot for next week.

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

In fact, here's the first lesson we can learn from them. The first thing we need to learn from these lesser-known Apostles: Set your heart to study scripture diligently. Set your heart, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, to study Scripture diligently. Andrew, Philip and Bartholomew, as I said, I like to call these guys the Bible Students. We'll get to that in a moment, but Andrew we know as Peter's younger brother. He's the man who liked to go around introducing everyone to Jesus. That's the picture we

get of him. Philip, we know as well; he's a friend of Andrew, a companion of him. We'll look at that as well. But who's this guy Bartholomew? Let's just identify him really quickly. Then we'll see what we can learn from all these men as a group. He's called Bartholomew four times in Scripture—once in each of the lists of Apostles. And besides those references, you never hear anything more about a guy named Bartholomew. That's it. It's likely due to the fact that Bartholomew is a more formal name. It's what commentator Alfred Palmer calls a "patronym"—that is, a name that's derived from and representing his father. So the name "Bartholomew" literally means "son of Tolmai." That points to this man being known probably by another name. So as we look around in the Bible for clues identifying his other name, we notice first that Bartholomew is listed next to Philip in the Synoptic Gospels.

You realize that Philip is the one who introduced Nathanael to Christ in John 1:45. The Synoptic Gospels never mention Nathanael, only Bartholomew. And in John's Gospel, it's never Bartholomew, only Nathanael. He's a companion of the Apostles from the earliest days, and as we see also at the very end in John 21, some of the Apostles who followed Peter to go back to

fishing we read in verse 2 were, "Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin)"—we know those guys. Then, "Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples." So, by process of comparison, contrast, by process of elimination, we come to the conclusion that Bartholomew and Nathanael are one and the same man. All that the Synoptic Gospels can tell us about any Bartholomew is that he's numbered among the Twelve—anything else we learn about him is going to come from John's Gospel when he tells us about Nathanael.

So with that in mind, let's turn over to John's Gospel—John, Chapter 1—and we're going to learn a few things about this man Nathanael. While you're getting over there, I'll just mention a couple of things about the close connection between Andrew and Philip. In the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—Andrew and Philip only receive brief mention. They're just named—not much more about them there. We might put Andrew in another list like a second or a third list of the Apostles, except for his close connection with Peter. He was Peter's brother, so he's always tagging along. So he's in that inner circle of the circle of most intimate disciples. But even Jesus would sometimes single out Peter, James and John and leave out poor Andrew on the side. That had to hurt. It had to be a bummer to him, but we

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

So these guys are curious Bible students, always eager to learn and understand. And we find as Jesus answered the questions, we get this prophecy about the end times that we call the Olivet Discourse. All that is prompted by the private questions of that inner circle, in which Andrew was sometimes included. As we're going to see, Andrew is associated with other curious Bible Students among the Twelve as well. It's Andrew who is the guy who keeps them all connected. The rest of what we learn about Andrew, as well as Philip or Nathanael or Bartholomew—it all comes through John's Gospel. What we learn there starting in John 1 is that there is a close connection between Andrew, who has a position in that first group of Apostles, and then Philip and Nathanael were in that second group of Apostles. A picture emerges there which puts Andrew at

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

Let's stop there. There's Andrew. That's how we're introduced to Andrew, making connections. The next day, Jesus found Philip, verse 43, and he's a friend of Andrew and Peter. Philip is from the same city of Bethsaida. Then in verse 45, Philip did what

Andrew did. He found his friend Nathanael, and he told him about Jesus. These guys are key in keeping the Apostles bonded together. And if you think about it, if all the Apostles were like Peter—all having Peter's personality, they'd be flying all over the place. They'd be shooting off in all kinds of different directions, following their own impetuous natures. If they were all like James and John, all hammer and tongs, the group would be like a dark thundercloud. You know, you'd see this group coming and take shelter and hide from the coming storm that's about to come down on you. So Jesus, in addition to men like Peter and James and John, also chose some milder-natured men—friendly men, socially gracious, winsome people, men like Andrew and Philip—really to keep this Apostle band from splitting apart.

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

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

We find Andrew and Philip together in close connection in other places in John's Gospel as well, earlier in John's Gospel, John chapter 6. I know I'm taking you in a couple different places. Go to Chapter 6 and keep a finger in John 1. Turn over to the beginning of John 6. Remember, this is the incident of the feeding to the 5,000. It's interesting to read not just the fact of the miracle, but Jesus' intention to teach his disciples. He wants them to see not just the miracle, but the sign that's pointed out by the miracle. Notice in verse 4; we'll start reading there.

"Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand [it is a different one than John 12]. Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, 'Two hundred denarii worth of

bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?' Jesus said, "Have the people sit down."

And then the miracle happens. He fed them all. Jesus fully satisfied 5,000 men—and that's just the men. There are also women and children, families. They're all fed there—10,000 people, maybe 15,000, maybe 20,000. Jesus fully satisfied them. Sometimes Philip is called a bean counter, like he's one of those accountant types who has no faith. He's just looking at the numbers, and he can't think beyond the numbers. I think that's not what's going on here. Jesus is preparing these men—Philip and Andrew—ahead of time. He's preparing them before he performed the sign. He's getting them to think, getting them ready to see something remarkable, and what Jesus wanted Philip and Andrew to see and understand is that he's greater than Moses—that he himself is the bread of heaven with the power to feed God's people. That's obviously a lesson for all the Apostles. So why is it that Jesus singled out Philip and Andrew for this lesson? He

knew what he was going to do. Why single them out? Why did he test them in particular just prior to performing the sign?

Well, with that in mind, just go back then to John chapter 1, and let's look at this very first glimpse that we get of Andrew, Philip and Nathanael from the very earliest days. We already read there in verses 35-42 that when Andrew brought his brother to Jesus, Andrew had been joined to the disciples of John the Baptist, and that tells me something about his understanding of Scripture. It tells me something about his concern to repent and to prepare his heart for the coming Messiah. He's obviously anticipating the Messiah such that when John pointed and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God," Andrew immediately abandoned John to follow Jesus, as he should have. You know that reference to the Lamb of God? You can't really find that reference in Scripture. You go back to Genesis 22, mentioned in Hebrews 11 where Abraham offered up his son Isaac, and yet, remember the angel of the Lord stopped him? He showed him a ram caught in the thicket by its horns—a picture of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Andrew had to have thought about that—this Lamb of God.

He now left immediately. He's tied not to John, but he's tied to truth. He immediately follows Jesus, and when he finds his brother in verse 41, Andrew announces to him—not about the Lamb of God—he says, “We have found the Messiah.” He makes a connection there. That's a lot of thinking. That's a lot of meditation on truth. That's a lot of connections that he made there. We read over it very, very quickly. I believe this Messianic anticipation on his part is not just an impulse. I believe that Andrew and his friends had been studying, they'd been waiting, they'd been anticipating for quite some time, and I think that's what John wants us to see as this passage unfolds.

Take a look at the introduction to Philip and Nathanael. In verse 43 he's leaving the Jordan River and heading up to Galilee. He's going by way of Cana, probably to attend that wedding at Cana where he's going to change the water into wine. Andrew and Simon Peter are with him. And then we read this in verses 43 to 46: “The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Philip said to him, "Come and see."

That was quite an intriguing way for Philip to entice, who by nature seems to be cynical, seems to be skeptical about Jesus' origin. Philip, in order to entice him to come and see for himself, starts with what's biblical, with what's prophesied, and then he connects it to Jesus. "We have found the one predicted in Scripture, the One of whom Moses wrote in the law, the One of whom the prophets wrote." And then Philip makes the connection from a real man to a real place in their time, a Davidic descendant, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. And despite the snarky response on Nathanael's part, this regional jab at the despised Nazareth—by the way, Nathanael was from Cana in Galilee, as we've already mentioned, a much smaller city than Nazareth. He had no room to be condemning Nazareth. Both were merely villages, quite insignificant. But despite Nathanael's seemingly abrasive reply, what Philip told Nathanael was enough to get him up and bring him to see for himself. As a fellow student of Scripture, as someone who, like Andrew and Philip, was anticipating the coming of the Messiah, Nathanael is intrigued.

Look at verse 47. "Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!'" Jesus evidently didn't say this directly to Nathanael, though Nathanael heard him say it. He's talking to the other disciples, pointing at Nathanael. He's making a point. He's pointing out about Nathanael that he has this guileless nature, but there's also a subtle statement about Nathanael as a straight shooter—in contrast, by the way, with the nation of Israel, which follows the pattern of that prototype Jacob, whose name means "deceiver, one who grabs the heel." That's how the nation was characterized. By contrast, here's Nathanael—not a deceiver, not someone who's trying get something, but someone who's a straight shooter, a straight talker, guileless. In other words, Jesus is saying, "Hey, check this out everyone, an Israelite, one who isn't a deceiver." What do you know? He's making a point. So first it's a point about a commendation about Nathanael's character, but second, it's a point of condemnation about Israel's character.

Third, we see from the rest of the narrative that Jesus wants to plant a seed in these disciples' minds. He wants them

thinking about Jacob and about Israel. Look at the rest of the narrative. He's preparing their minds for what he's about to teach them all in the flow of a conversation, all in connection to this introduction to Nathanael. Verse 48: "Nathanael said to [Jesus], 'How do you know me?'" He wants to understand how Jesus, whom he had never met, has any familiarity whatsoever with his nature or his character. So Jesus gives him a couple of facts and, by the way, a glimpse into his divinity. "Jesus answered him, 'Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.'" That had to rattle him a bit. "Are you stalking me? Is that what's going on? I mean, were you hiding somewhere, and I just didn't see you?" If you've ever seen a fig tree, its branches are very low to the ground. It makes a perfect place for you to crawl under there, especially on a hot day. It's a nice cool place for you to go under there and rest. Also, to pray. Also, to meditate. It's not large enough for a crowd, not large enough even really for two. It's just a private place to be alone with your thoughts.

We can tell from Nathanael's reply and then by Jesus' follow-up response that Jesus not only saw him, he knew him. He knew what he was thinking. He knew what he was meditating about.

There Nathanael is, under the fig tree. He's in this private place for thinking and reflection—this great place of prayer, his place of meditation. We don't know exactly what Nathanael was thinking, but from Nathanael's immediate decision to come and see the Messiah to whom Philip wanted to introduce him, and from everything that flows here, it seems that Jesus knows what Philip is thinking about, what he's praying about, what he's hoping for. We can speculate about his thoughts, but we don't want to go too far with that. But it's not entirely unwarranted by the context here, by the narrative. John wants us to see that Jesus had divine insight, knowledge—getting into Nathanael's head. What comes next in verse 49? It's an amazing early confession of Jesus' true identity. Nathanael answered Jesus not by saying, "Hey, why have you been spying on me?" Or, "Hey, were you hiding around the bush?" He doesn't say anything like that. He says what?—"Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" That response opens up what Nathanael was thinking about.

It also reveals Nathanael's familiarity with the Old Testament. Psalm 2 about the divine Sonship of Jesus Christ, 2 Samuel 7 about the promise of a Davidic King, and Deuteronomy 18

certainly factored into his mind as he knows the promise of Moses to look to a prophet like him who will come later. This guileless man has just seen prophetic Scripture coming to light and fulfillment right in front of his very eyes. Whereas before Nathanael didn't even address Jesus with any term of respect, now he calls him, "Rabbi." Whereas before Nathanael is rather cynical about anything good coming out of Nazareth, now he sees Jesus' true origin as the Son of God. Whereas before Nathanael was reluctant to share in Philip's excitement about this fulfillment—"Him of whom the Moses and the Law and also the Prophets wrote"—now he concludes with Philip, this Jesus of Nazareth, this Son of Joseph is the King of Israel. And Andrew was there to hear this, so was Philip, along with Simon Peter, John as well. But these three, Andrew, Philip and Nathanael—here they're rejoicing at the very beginning, at the very introduction of Jesus. They're seeing their own satisfaction and joy in seeing the word of God come alive right in front of their faces. They just witnessed John 1:14: The Word had become flesh and was dwelling and standing right in front of them. They had just seen his glory, "glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." Incredible moment! And they're just getting started. This is the inception of their relationship with Jesus.

Listen, this is why I believe later when Jesus is spending one last intimate evening with his eleven Apostles, he chided Philip about a request that Philip made on the very night of Jesus' betrayal. After they had been through so much together, do you remember what Philip asked Jesus? He says, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Philip is there speaking on behalf of all the Apostles in a sense. And he's speaking as one of the thoughtful ones. He's one of the reflective Bible Students, one of the ones who knew the Old Testament scriptures well, along with Nathanael, along with Andrew. And Jesus' reply, while he's chiding him, he's not at all harsh in answering Philip, but you do sense in his reply in John 14:9 and following a bit of sadness in his tone. "Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father?" Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.'" "

That bit of correction and rebuke is based on what Philip and Andrew and Nathanael had seen in Jesus from the very beginning, what they had tracked all through his ministry, even what they had confessed about him. Jesus had promised them—he's speaking to Nathanael in John chapter 1, but the promise is for all of them as I'm going to show you. Jesus promised these diligent Bible Students that they would see incredible things. Look there in John 1:50. Jesus responds to Nathanael, to that affirmation of Jesus' divinity and Messianic royalty. "Jesus answered him, 'Because I said to you, "I saw you under the fig tree," do you believe? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'"

Notice Jesus' answer to Nathanael in verse 50. He spoke to Nathanael in verse 51. The pronouns are in the singular there, but then he gives the promise, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened." Those pronouns "you" are in the plural. He's extending the promise to all of them. All those Bible students standing there at the moment—Andrew and Simon, Philip and Nathanael. No doubt John is there as well, but again he's hidden in the background, the invisible narrator. So what does

Jesus mean here by this promise? Heaven opened? Angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man? What is that about? Well, it's a clear reference that these Bible Students would immediately pick up on. Do you know where their minds went? Genesis 28:12 and following. You don't need to turn there, but you can just jot it down and look at it later.

That's the passage of Scripture that describes Jacob dreaming, right? He's at Bethel. Bethel, which means "house of God." And he's dreaming there about a ladder that's set up on earth, and the top of the ladder is reaching into heaven itself. And it says there, "And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." They are starting from the earth, which demonstrates the angelic ministry to the saints on earth. They're starting there, they're ascending into heaven, getting their orders and coming back to earth, all on this ladder. "And behold"—verse 13 of Genesis 28—"The Lord [Yahweh] stood above it and he said, 'I am the Lord [Yahweh], the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.'" It's a two-fold promise here that Jesus gives. He says, "You will see that. You're going to see the heavens opened; and number two, you're going to see the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." The heavens

opened; that's a promise of salvation there. The promise of salvation, intimacy with God, access to heaven. It's a promise that is only fulfilled through the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. He died—1 Peter 3:18—"Suffering once for sins [...] to bring sinners to God."

But instead of the angels of God ascending and descending on Jacob's ladder, Jesus is now standing in place of the ladder. He's become the ladder. He is the mediator between heaven and earth, and no longer is this promise in the vision for Israel alone, for Jacob at Bethel, at the house of God. Now, the tabernacle of God is among men in Jesus Christ, and the promise is for all who believe. Here are these Bible Students: Andrew, Philip and Nathanael. And this is day number one of knowing Jesus Christ. This is day one for them. Here's the reward of all that study of Scripture, from their upbringing and all the way to this point, and they find the richness of Christ fulfilled in all of Scripture. All that meditation under the fig tree, all that study growing up—all that consummated in the thrill of the everlasting joy of meeting Jesus, the God of very God, standing in front of them. And they can know him.

Later, after his ascension, they went back to the Scripture, and they kept finding Jesus there. Luke 24 shows that Jesus went to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They're walking there, they're troubled, they're flustered. They don't know what to make of the things that have happened in Jerusalem, the crucifixion of this man. They thought, "He's the Messiah, surely," but no, then he dies on a cross. How can he be the Messiah? Jesus comes to them and says, "Let me show you everything starting in Moses and the law of Moses and all the prophets. Let me show you everything concerning myself." That became the pattern for study. Their hearts were filled with joy to see Jesus revealed in Scripture.

Beloved, that's the lesson for us as disciples, that we can learn from these students of Scripture. Set your heart to study Scripture diligently. Be like Ezra, who set his heart to study Scripture diligently, to obey it and then to teach God's statutes and rules to his people. Listen, if God is your eternal reward, if Christ is your treasure, then whatever he has said becomes the object of your devoted study so that you can worship him. You're going to want to know it thoroughly, as deeply as you can, that you might not only know the facts, but you can then obey its precepts so you might live in wisdom and understanding, and

then go out and tell others about him because whatever you teach, you keep; whatever you give away, you hold, you learn, and you understand. Don't be satisfied with just coming once a Sunday to listen to teaching here at the church, even twice week, even three times a week. That's good. Gifted teachers in the church are given to you by Christ for your edification. But listen, you've got to take that back into your private place, under your own fig tree that you might meditate and learn and know and worship and be filled with joy.

Those are three of the eight. Already, right? We've got five more in two points. But I have a lot less to say about them, so don't worry. The lessons are just as useful for us, though, so pay attention, all right? So 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 our heart to love Christ fervently. Set 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 that in his Gospel, in his list, when he lists his name 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; whereas, Mark and Luke don't mention that, just Matthew.

We've already been introduced to Matthew, also known as Levi, the former tax collector. We learned about him in Luke 5:27 and following, and I'm not going to re-preach that sermon; you can go back and listen to it. But 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 in John's Gospel. The only thing we know about Matthew is what happened at this time of his 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. That 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 is no distance that is too great for God's reach. He can 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. He 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 a profound gratitude and 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? He's completely content. That comes through in the narrative. It'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 in John 11, John 14, John 20. In fact, turn to John 20, the end of John's Gospel

just to show him. This is the passage he is most known for, that post-resurrection expression of unbelief. John 20 is the “Doubting Thomas” reference. I don’t think “Doubting Thomas” is an altogether accurate way of referring to Thomas. The name “Thomas” is Aramaic in origin. It’s *tauma*, which means “twin.” The Greek form of that word is *didymus*—“twin.” The reference of that nickname is lost to us. We don’t know—perhaps he has a twin brother, perhaps he’s that guy who looks like everybody else. I don’t know. So they called him the Twin.

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’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 a 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 is 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. [Oops.] So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see 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 becoming "Doubting Thomas," the patron saint of all the atheists and the agnostics out there? No, not at all. I think the opposite is true here. I believe Thomas' disbelief at this point is 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 as 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 is born out of a deep, deep disappointment, a deep sorrow. It's a sorrow that came from what he had: 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 swarming with religious leaders who want Jesus dead. The Apostles don't think it is a great idea to come near Jerusalem at this time, but Thomas, in contrast to the rest of those men, steeled himself, and he tried to encourage his fellow disciples. And he said to them in John 11:16, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." What's he doing here? Is this "death-wish" theology? Is this him merely 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 confirmed 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. I mean, what is good without Jesus being here?"

In fact, in the Upper Room, Jesus is again telling his disciples of his departure. He said, "I go to prepare a place for you, [and] I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And 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 in John 14:5, "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 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 who haven't seen him, haven't touched his nail prints, haven't put our hands into his side—and yet, we believe, don't we?

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” That's the point of including Thomas here in this narrative at the very end. It's not good, obviously, for Thomas to disbelieve, but Jesus' restoration of Thomas is specific, it's precious, it's intentional, it provides a key lesson for all of us. Look at John 20:26: “Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. 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 “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” is 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!' 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 his disappointed and dejected disciples, leads to the purpose statement for the entire Gospel of John. Look at it in verse 30, "Now 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 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, and here to the very end. And John is saying, "Look, I'm an eye-witness; trust what I am telling you."

Apart from the first point, being a diligent student of Scripture, our faith has no objective truth to anchor into. This isn't like what I hear whenever I go to Disneyland: "Believe." And it's squishy. There's no objective content. Believe what? Just believe in belief and let's have some fireworks. My family loves it, but every time I'm there, I'm saying, "Look at those fireworks

and just know they're celebrating belief in nothing!" And we paid a lot of money for that.

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 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 made him useful. He was content from the very beginning. He even continues to reference his tax collector background because it became an asset. reminding him of the gratitude he had for Christ saving him and then putting him into the band of disciples—and then even naming him as an Apostle, but Matthew's tax collector skills became useful in writing the Gospel. The pen that he used to use to record tax receipts became the very tool 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 him 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 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 fervently, and finally, set your heart to serve God faithfully. We just have a few minutes for this point and that's fine, but there's just not much said about these three men in the final group of the twelve. But there's James, the son of Alphaeus, first. In Mark 15:40, he's called James, *mikros* in the Greek. It's a nickname that may refer to a small stature, but more likely it refers to his age in relation to Big James—Big Jimmy, the son of Zebedee. So here he's known as James the less, James the younger, maybe Little James. I like that one—Little James. From the crucifixion narratives—Matthew 27:55, 56, Mark 15:40-41, Luke 24:10—we learn that the mother of this man 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, 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' mother, Mary Magdalene, Salome—these women are ministering to Jesus. They become witnesses to his crucifixion, along with Mary, the mother of Jesus. A lot Marys around the Cross. But, Mary, the mother of Little James, along with Mary Magdalene, 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, 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 sympathy. Whether this is his former association with the zealots, or perhaps a stronger, more formal 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 he lists and describes there, along with the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the

Essenes. Zealots were fierce nationalists. Josephus obviously didn't like them because their fierce nationalistic spirit 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. It 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 was also fomented by the Zealot party.

Jesus' choice, here, of Simon the Zealot put him in close association with Matthew. Isn't that interesting? A former tax collector, a hated Roman collaborator. That's 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 have been dead by AD 70, part of a 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's and Mark's listings of the twelve, they list Simon the Zealot as the last of the faithful Apostles that they named, and he's named right next to Judas Iscariot. Judas Iscariot is the only Judean in the list. And it could be a hint that both of those men held nationalistic sympathies. Whereas Judas Iscariot succumbed to the 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 there's Little James, Simon the Zealot, finally there is Judas the son of James. In the lists in Matthew and Mark, he's called Thaddeus. Some textual variants call him Lebbaeus; this is the best reading. It's likely this Apostle was known by his given name Judas, and then a nickname, which is Thaddeus in the Aramaic and then Lebbaeus in the Hebrew. Thaddeus is a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic *thaddai*. It refers to the heart, and it likely means "courageous heart." Lebbaeus also, from the Hebrew—the word *leb*, which is "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 a courageous heart." Not too

much to infer about him—we don't know. But his nickname may tell us 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 him, '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 we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love 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 whom 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 Thaddeus, 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 and Judas son of James. They ministered faithfully, but also they ministered in obscurity. All the Apostles, like these men whom we've talked about this morning, 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 must 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 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.

Many of you know that I came from the ministry of a well-known servant of Jesus Christ, a faithful pastor named John MacArthur—perhaps you’ve heard of him. 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. A lot we could say about that, but I don’t want to focus on that. I often remember, as I reflect on John MacArthur and his faithfulness over many decades of ministry, that God raised him up for a very good work—a fifth-generation pastor—all kinds of providential things in his background that made him and his ministry into what it is today. Many have been so blessed by that ministry.

There are others, though—many, many others—who’ve worked behind the scenes in total obscurity, and their faithful work unto Christ has extended Dr. MacArthur’s ministry far and wide. There is one servant, who is now with the Lord, named Nguyen Cultrip. He used to reproduce recordings of John MacArthur’s

pulpit sermons onto audio cassette tapes. For those of you younger people, just think basically MP3, but in a plastic box, okay? But he used to take those audio cassette tapes and organize them in shoeboxes. He delivered those tapes to shut-ins so they could hear the pulpit sermons. From Nguyen Cultrip's shoeboxes, one of those tapes found its way into the hands of a Christian radio station manager in Baltimore, Maryland, who—without permission by the way—played the tape on the radio, and the Word of Grace ministry was born, which became Grace to You. The rest is history. Nguyen Cultrip's shoeboxes also became a tape library kept at Grace to You. Each message was recorded in multiple, and those tapes were all stored there and then they were lent out around the country—sort of the concept of Netflix. Before Internet streaming, Netflix would send out DVDs to people and people would send them back in and go back and forth. Where do you think Netflix got the idea? Nguyen Cultrip. But with the advent of the Internet, that ministry became obsolete, obviously. All the starting material, though, was there because of those many years of work by a dedicated and faithful Nguyen Cultrip, who ministered faithfully and in total obscurity.

There is another servant. She is also with the Lord. Her name is Arlene Hampton. Her life was devoted to transcribing

John MacArthur's messages. She'd listen in her home to those audio recordings and she'd transcribe them, put them into print. None of John MacArthur's publishing ministry would have been possible without her faithful, behind-the-scenes work because those messages put into print were then able to be reviewed and organized into books, commentaries. We're indebted to her service to Christ because she provided all that starting material for Dr. MacArthur's books and commentaries, which brings up another servant named Dave Enos. Davie Enos attended Talbot Seminary just after John MacArthur did, but instead of heading into some kind of pastoral ministry or teaching ministry, he devoted his mind and his writing gifts to turn Dr. MacArthur's pulpit material into what we now call the MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series, which is just finished and published by Moody Press. So many pastors and teachers, including myself, have benefited from those commentaries, from those transcripts, from those audio recordings. We can give thanks to God for his sovereign choice. We can give thanks to Jesus Christ for setting apart some for one purpose and many others for others.

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 this:

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.