



LESSON 9

JAMES (THE LESS), SIMON (THE ZEALOT), AND JUDAS (NOT ISCARIOT)

THE NOT-SO-WELL-KNOWN TRIO

James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called the Zealot; Judas the son of James . . .

LUKE 6:15-16

The final group of four disciples is the least known to us, except for Judas Iscariot, who is notorious for betraying Christ. Based on their absence from the Gospel accounts, they seem to have been less intimate with Jesus than the other disciples. Yet we must not forget that they also gave up everything to follow after

Jesus and become His disciples. Peter spoke for each of them when he said, “See, we have left all and followed You” (Luke 18:28).

The disciples we will discuss in this lesson—James (the Less), Simon (the Zealot), and Judas (not Iscariot)—all made heroic sacrifices. Yet we don’t get to see that heroicism in the Gospels. In fact, when *any* of the disciples are visible in the biblical story, it is typically to put their weaknesses on display (see Mark 9:14–29). We see them thinking more highly of themselves than they should, or speaking when silence would be wise, or confused about things that Jesus has just said. Time and again, in the amazing honesty of the Gospel accounts, the shortcomings of these ordinary men show up far more than their strengths.

We do see the eleven disciples in a different light after the infilling of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. From that point on, we see them making courageous decisions, performing great miracles, and preaching with a newfound boldness. Yet beyond the few stories we find in the book of Acts, we read little else about them in the New Testament. The legacy of the disciples wasn’t as biblical celebrities but as the foundation stones of the church (see Ephesians 2:20). The church exists today, more than two thousand years later, because these individuals were willing to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The twelve disciples, with the exception of Judas Iscariot, were men of true faith who sacrificed everything to follow Jesus. (Judas’s failure to make that commitment, while pretending that he had, was what made him so despicable.) This is the most heroic fact about them—and it stands true not just for the disciples we know well but also for the lesser-known ones such as James the Less, Simon the Zealot, and Judas (not Iscariot).

STARTING OUT

Who is a “silent servant” you know? The one whose name isn’t familiar to people yet God has used greatly in your church, or within your family, or even in your own life? What do you appreciate most about the way this person ministers?

EXPLORING THE STORY

As we examine this trio of disciples, we find that even though the Bible has little to say about them, they nonetheless have their own distinctions. In fact, the nicknames they are given can tell us something about them: James *the Less*, Simon *the Zealot*, and Judas (*not Iscariot*). In this section, you will explore what you can discern about the men given these nicknames.

James the Less

The ninth name in each of the four lists of the disciples is “James the son of Alphaeus” (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). This is the one thing the Bible tells us about him. If this James ever wrote anything, or if he ever stood before kings or preached to vast crowds, we have no word of it. He is virtually unknown to us. He even had a common name.

The distinction “son of Alphaeus” tells us who this man is *not*. This James is not the son of Zebedee who was in Jesus’ close inner circle. Nor was this James another notable person we find in the New Testament—Jesus’ half-brother named James, who was a leader in the Jerusalem church (see Acts 15:13–21) and likely the author of the epistle that bears his name.

Besides this James being the son of Alphaeus, we also know that his mother’s name was Mary and that she had another son named Joses (see Mark 15:40; Matthew 27:56). Mary was one of few eyewitnesses to Jesus’ crucifixion named in the Bible, and she also helped to prepare Christ’s body for burial (see Mark 16:1). Joses must have also been a well-known follower of the Lord, as his name is specifically mentioned in two Gospels.

DISAPPEARING ACT

All the disciples more or less disappear from the biblical narrative within a few years after Pentecost. In no case does Scripture give us a full biography. That is because Scripture always keeps the focus on the power of Christ and the power of the Word, not the men who were merely instruments of that power.¹

Mark reveals that James was nicknamed “the Less” (see Mark 15:40). This could refer to his physical features—perhaps he was short or small-framed. It could also indicate that he was young in age or, at least, younger than the other disciple with the same name. But most likely, it refers to his level of influence. James the son of Zebedee was from a prominent family (see John 18:15–16) *and* part of the Lord’s inner circle. We could say that he was “James the Most.” Therefore, the son of Alphaeus was known as “James the Less.”

It could be that the son of Alphaeus was all these things—a small, young, quiet individual who kept a low profile. Still, he was one of the twelve disciples who was personally selected by Jesus for a reason, trained by Him, filled with the Holy Spirit, and then sent out as a witness just *like the others*. This alone tells us something about the man.

Now, it is possible this James had some pedigree. Based on Mark 2:14, he may have been the brother of Levi (Matthew). Or, comparing Mark 15:40 and John 19:25, he might have been Jesus’ cousin. But since Scripture doesn’t tell us, the answer isn’t important. What made James important was not his lineage but the Lord he served and the message he proclaimed.

There is some evidence that James the Less took the gospel to Syria and Persia. Accounts of his death differ, yet we can be sure that he answered Jesus’ call to preach the gospel and performed the “signs and wonders and mighty deeds” of an apostle (2 Corinthians 12:12). Furthermore, even though today we barely know his name, it will be forever etched on one of the foundations of the New Jerusalem (see Revelation 21:14).

- Read John 3:25–30. What did John the Baptist understand about his role? How did he view his “status” and influence as compared to that of Jesus?

- Read Hebrews 11:35–38. How do the deeds and spiritual dedication of these unnamed saints “stack up” to the deeds and dedication of the scriptural

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saints who are familiar to you? What does this say to you about what matters from God's perspective?

- The first words of verse 38 indicate "the world was not worthy" of these people (even the ones whose names we don't know). What does this say about their status in God's eyes?

- What lessons do you learn from James "the Less" about the way God uses even those who prefer to keep a low profile? What inspiration does this provide in your life?

Simon the Zealot

The next name given in Luke's list of the disciples is Simon the Zealot (see Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). In the lists of apostles in Matthew and Mark, he is called "Simon the Cananite" (Matthew 10:4; Mark 3:18). The designation *Cananite* comes from the Hebrew root word *qanna*, which means "to be zealous." So each designation points to the same meaning.

TWO EXTREMES

As one of the Twelve, Simon had to associate with Matthew, who was at the opposite end of the political spectrum, collecting taxes for the Roman government. At one point in his life, Simon would probably have gladly killed Matthew. In the end, they became spiritual brethren, working side by side for the same cause.²

It is possible that Simon had a “zealous” temperament, but more likely he carried the nickname because he was a former member of a political sect known as the Zealots. According to the historian Josephus, the Zealots were one of the four main parties among the Jews of that time (the others being the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes).² The Zealots were the most politically minded of the four groups. They believed that only God had the right to rule over the Jews, and so they were hoping for a Messiah who would lead them in overthrowing the Roman government and restore the kingdom to Israel. In the meantime, these extremists sought to advance their agenda through stealth acts of violence.

Josephus described them as being “zealous in the worst actions, and extravagant in them beyond the example of others.”³ What made them even more formidable was that seemingly nothing could extinguish their fanaticism. The Zealots were prepared to suffer any kind of death, torture, or pain for the sake of their cause. Until he met Jesus, Simon was one of these. We don’t know what his calling to faith was like, but once he embraced Jesus as his Lord, he turned his now-godly zeal toward introducing new citizens to the eternal kingdom.

Several sources report that Simon took the gospel north to the British Isles. There is no reliable account of how he met his end, but by all accounts he suffered a martyr’s death. This former member of an organization that was willing to kill (and be killed) for an earthly political agenda had found a far greater cause—and for that he willingly gave his life.

- Read Matthew 10:4 and Mark 3:18–19. Given the Gospel writers often indicate the pairs among the apostles, who was likely Simon the Zealot’s minis-

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try partner? (As a sidenote, they probably both originally followed Jesus for similar political reasons.)

- Read Mark 12:13–17. The Herodians, as the name implies, were a political group who supported the Herodian dynasty in Judea. How did this group (and the Pharisees) try to trap Jesus in “politics”? How did Jesus respond to their question?

- Read Colossians 1:21–23. The disciples came from different backgrounds and contexts that likely conflicted with each other. However, according to Paul, what should every Christian’s primary cause be now? What keeps our passions properly directed?

- Have you ever ended up as spiritual kin to somebody who was previously devoted to an opposing cause? If so, what impression has that left on you about God's kingdom?

Judas (not Iscariot)

The last name on the list of faithful disciples is Judas, son of a man named James. The name Judas means "praised," but it was forever marred because of Judas Iscariot. For this reason, when the apostle John mentions him, he specifies "Judas (not Iscariot)" (John 14:22).

Judas the son of James had two other names. He was also called "Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus" (Matthew 10:3). These were essentially nicknames. Thaddaeus means "breast child," like a nursing baby. It could derisively refer to a "mama's boy," or maybe he was the youngest of several siblings and therefore the baby of the family. His other name, Lebbaeus, means "heart child." Both names suggest a childlike tenderness.

We don't typically picture a gentle soul like this among the other mostly rough-and-tumble disciples, much less hanging around a group that includes Simon the Zealot. Yet the Lord uses all kinds of personalities and temperaments for His kingdom work. Compassionate and sweet-natured types make great preachers just as much as zealots do.



OBSCURE BUT STILL IMPORTANT

Like the other three faithful members of the third apostolic group, Lebbaeus Thaddaeus is more or less shrouded in obscurity. But that obscurity should not cloud our respect for them. They all became mighty preachers.⁵



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John's Gospel provides one quick glimpse of this Judas and his heart for others. During the Last Supper, Jesus said to His disciples, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him" (14:21). This Judas then said to Him, "Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and not to the world?" (verse 22).

Here we see the gentle humility of this man. He was not being brash or overconfident. He was not rebuking the Lord, as if he knew best. His question is full of meekness. He was surprised that Jesus would let this ragtag group of eleven in on the good news of salvation but keep it from everybody else. Given that the gospel is the happiest news for every man, woman, and child, he didn't want anyone to miss out. So Judas Lebbaeus Thaddaeus was innocently asking, "Why are You going to disclose Yourself to us and not to the whole world?"

Jesus' answer was laden with tenderness: "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" (verse 23). In other words, Jesus replied that He would manifest Himself to anyone who loves Him. It was a message that Judas the son of James took into the world. Tradition states he took the gospel to Edessa, a royal city in Mesopotamia, and even brought about the healing of its king.

This tenderhearted servant preached the love and forgiveness of Jesus and then, just like the rest of the better-known disciples, was martyred for his faith. Although his name has been tainted because of the other Judas, his testimony was not. Nothing could stain or hinder the testimony of this disciple who loved the Lord and obeyed His words.

- Read Mark 10:13-16. Judas's nicknames Thaddaeus and Lebbaeus suggest a childlike tenderness. What does Jesus say in this passage about having a heart "as a little child"?

- Read John 14:19–24. What did Jesus say that caused Judas to ask why He would make Himself known to the disciples but not to the whole world? How do you think Jesus' answer reassured Judas that He was not overlooking those who honestly sought to follow Him?

- Read Luke 15:8–10. Jesus did not come as the Messiah to take over the world externally (as many of the Jews expected) but to take over one heart at a time. What does this parable say about God's joy when even a *single* sinner repents?

- Judas Lebbaeus Thaddaeus was motivated to quietly serve the Lord and preach the gospel. What are your motivations when it comes to quietly serving the Lord and sharing about Christ?

CONSIDERING YOUR STORY

Read Matthew 8:18–22. The disciples were an intriguing group of men who had a variety of personalities in the mix. Yet they all shared at least one thing in common.

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- Many people who witnessed Jesus' miracles wanted to follow Him—but either the cost was too high or they had competing priorities. What do we know for certain about what the twelve disciples shared in common when it came to their commitment to Jesus?

- What keeps you committed to following after Jesus? How do your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ—in whatever walks of life they come from—help you in this?

- Take a moment to apply what you have learned about the lesser-known trio of James the Less, Simon the Zealot, and Judas (not Iscariot).

James the Less: What is one way that you are “quietly” serving God?

Simon the Zealot: How are you seeking after God above all else?

Judas (not Iscariot): How are you seeking to make your own name in God's kingdom?

APPLYING YOUR STORY

Jesus told His disciples, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). The goal is to make God's name famous on earth—not our own. What is one way today you can let your "light shine" to others?

CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, You loved me before the world began, and Your love will sustain me to the end. Thank You for knowing my mind and for seeing my heart even when I don't understand Your purposes. Draw me back to You and Your love if I start to lose my way. My heart's desire is to proclaim Your name rather than my own. Please use me for Your glory. Amen.

Notes

1. John MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 174.
2. MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men*, 177.
3. Josephus (AD 37–100), *Antiquities of the Jews*, xviii.
4. Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, iv.
5. MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men*, 178–179.