



## LESSON 1

# THE MEN JESUS CALLED: OUTSTANDINGLY ORDINARY

*No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain.*

JOHN 15:15-16

What comes to mind when you picture the twelve disciples? Perhaps the image is something similar to Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting *The Last Supper*, where the twelve men are dressed in fine clothing and look more like nobility than commoners. Or maybe the picture you see is of the larger-than-life saints with shining halos that are often depicted in European cathedrals. It's unfortunate the disciples have so often been put on marble pedestals or portrayed like

this. It dehumanizes them. They were just twelve ordinary men, perfectly human in every way, and we shouldn't lose touch with who they really were.

Jesus, in fact, seems to have deliberately chosen men who were notable only for their ordinariness. This would have been unusual in his day. In the first century, a rabbi—a Jewish religious teacher—would have sought out only well-educated students to be his disciples. Jesus, however, did not choose His disciples based on their knowledge, or intrinsic abilities, or outstanding talents. Rather, He chose ordinary Galileans, who would have been deemed by Jewish society as low-class, rural, and uneducated. They were commoners.

The twelve disciples were, in many ways, just like us. They came from all different kinds of backgrounds like us. They were selected by Jesus from the unworthy and the unqualified—just like us. Their transformation into vessels of honor was solely the work of the Potter. These men “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) because God worked in them to do it. So it is that we need to consider them not from their stained-glass or highly idealized images but as real living-and-breathing people. We need to get to know them as actual men and not as some kind of exalted figures from the pantheon of religious ritualism.

This not to undermine the importance of their office. The twelve disciples, in effect, became the true spiritual leaders of Israel. They were the ones to whom the Christian gospel was first entrusted. They became the foundation stones of the church, with “Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20). However, those truths are heightened, not diminished, by the fact that these men were so ordinary.

## STARTING OUT

Whether you know a little or a lot about the twelve disciples of Jesus, what do you hope will happen as you study the lives of these ordinary men in this study?

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## EXPLORING THE STORY

When you read the Gospels and Acts, it becomes evident that God's strategy for advancing His kingdom hinged on the twelve disciples. There was no backup plan if they failed. So, it is important to consider how these men were *called*, *trained*, and *tasked* for ministry. In this section, you will explore passages from the Bible that reveal how Jesus shaped these perfectly ordinary men into extraordinary representatives of God's kingdom.

### *The Calling of the Twelve*

When Andrew encountered Jesus, he was already a disciple of John the Baptist (see John 1:35, 40).<sup>1</sup> However, when he heard his teacher say, "Behold the Lamb of God" (verse 36), he began to follow after Jesus. This was phase one of the calling of the Twelve—a call to *conversion*. It was a call to recognize Jesus as the true Lamb of God and embrace Him by faith.

Phase two was a call to *ministry*. Luke relates a story of how Jesus had just finished teaching the multitudes from Peter's boat near the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus instructed Peter to launch out to the deep and put in his nets, and the resulting catch of fish overwhelmed the fishermen's nets (see 5:1-7). Jesus then said to Peter—and to James and John, who were with him—"From now on you will catch men" (verse 10). When the fishermen returned to the shore, "they forsook all and followed Him" (verse 11). From that point on, both sets of brothers—Peter and Andrew, and James and John—were inseparable from the Lord.

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## THE LAMB OF GOD

The use of a lamb for sacrifice was familiar to Jews. A lamb was used as a sacrifice during Passover (see Exodus 12:1-36); a lamb was led to the slaughter in the prophecies of Isaiah (see Isaiah 53:7); and a lamb was offered in the daily sacrifices of Israel (see Exodus 29:38-42; Numbers 28:1-8; see also Hebrews 10:5-7). John the Baptist used this expression as a reference to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to atone for the sins of the world, a theme which John the apostle carries throughout his writings (see John 19:36; Revelation 5:1-6; 7:17; 17:14) and that appears in other New Testament writings (see 1 Peter 1:19).<sup>1</sup>

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Phase three was a call to *apostleship*. The word *apostle* comes from the Greek *apostolos*, which conveys the idea of an ambassador, delegate, or official representative. Jesus selected and appointed the Twelve to be apostles out of a larger group of disciples who followed Him (see Luke 6:12-16). The Twelve were different in that they were His delegates. They spoke with His authority, delivered His message, and exercised His authority.

Phase four was a call to *martyrdom*. After Jesus rose from the dead, He appeared to eleven of His disciples (for Judas had hanged himself after his betrayal) and told them, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). This was, in effect, a call to martyrdom, as church history records that all of them except John were killed for their testimony.

- Read John 1:35-49. Phase one in the calling of the Twelve was *conversion*—recognizing Jesus as the Lord of all and embracing Him by faith. What are some of the examples of conversion found in this passage? What does Jesus' response to Nathanael indicate about His heart toward those who are more hesitant to accept Him at first as Lord?

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- Read Luke 5:8-11. Phase two was a call to *ministry*. What do Simon Peter's response and the first words of Jesus in His call to the four fishermen reveal about being a disciple?

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- Read Matthew 10:6-12. Phase three was a call to *apostleship*. How would the restrictions that Jesus specified help train these men for their future work?

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- Read John 21:18-19. Phase four was a call to *martyrdom*. What did Jesus say in this passage about what the cost would be to Peter for being His disciple?

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- Think about Jesus' call on your own life to be His disciple. Which of the following has been the most challenging for you—and why?

1. Conversion (believing in Christ):

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2. Ministry (giving up your work to do the Lord's work):

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3. Ambassadorship (representing Jesus in your world):

4. Discipleship and evangelism (living sacrificially and witnessing):

### *The Training of the Disciples*

The twelve disciples had now abandoned their nets, forsaken their fields, and left the tax tables behind to follow after Jesus. The next eighteen months of their lives would be filled with training in ministry. In this, they had the example, wisdom, and instruction of Jesus perpetually before them as a guide. Still, the learning process proved to be difficult, for they could be amazingly thick-headed. They had to overcome many obstacles for their training to take place.

First, the disciples needed to gain *spiritual understanding*. We see this in the fact that Jesus often said things to them like, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand?" (Matthew 15:16-17). Jesus addressed this lack of spiritual understanding by continuing to teach them. Even after His resurrection, He stayed with them for forty days "speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

Second, the disciples needed to obtain *greater faith*. At one point, Jesus said to them, "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?" (Mark 4:40). This lack of faith on the disciples' part often left them unable to harness the power of God that was available to them. Jesus remedied this weakness by continuing to do miracles in their midst. The Gospels repeat that most of Jesus' miracles were not done primarily for the benefit of unbelievers but were done "in the presence of His disciples" so that their faith could be strengthened (John 20:30). Jesus later also sent the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower them (see Acts 1:8).

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TRUE FAITH

Jesus said to His disciples, "I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20). True faith, by Christ's definition, always involves surrender to the will of God. Both the source and the object of all genuine faith—even the weak, mustard-seed variety—is God.<sup>3</sup>

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Third, the disciples needed to learn *commitment*. The disciples were thrilled to follow after Jesus when the crowds were cheering and the miracles were being multiplied. But as soon as the first sign of real trouble came their way in the form of Jesus' arrest, they all forsook Him and fled (see Mark 14:50). Jesus responded to their proneness to defection by interceding for them in prayer. Shortly before His death, He prayed they would remain *ultimately* faithful to Him and that the Father would bring them to heaven (see John 17:11-26).

- Read Mark 4:10-12. What did Jesus do after teaching the crowds to provide His disciples with greater spiritual understanding?

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- Read Matthew 17:14-21. Why did the disciples lack the power needed to cast the demon out of the boy? What did Jesus reveal about the power of faith?

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- Read Mark 14:27-28. What did Jesus prophesy about His disciples' lack of commitment in following Him when the situation grew difficult for them?

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- Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. What does Paul's humble admission in this passage tell you about what the mindset should be for a true disciple of Christ?

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### ***The Task of the Disciples***

Jesus' training of the twelve disciples involved a kind of internship. He would send them out on short-term mission projects, and they would report back to Him on how things were going (see Luke 9:10; 10:17). Jesus graciously encouraged them, lovingly corrected them, patiently instructed them, and steadfastly invested His time and energy in them. The question is . . . *Why?* Why was it so important for these twelve men to be personally equipped by Christ?

Remember that God's strategy for advancing His kingdom hinged on the twelve disciples. They were common men, but they had been given uncommon tasks. These tasks included nothing less than providing the source of church doctrine, edifying the body of Christ, and serving as examples of virtue. Let's examine each of these in turn.

First, the disciples were tasked to be the *source of church doctrine*. Not only would they found the church and play a pivotal role in its leadership, but they would also be the channels through which most of the New Testament was given. They did not preach a human message but one that had been given to them by revelation from God. In fact, the written New Testament is nothing other than the Holy Spirit-inspired record of the apostles' teaching.



### THE DISCIPLES' TRAINING PROGRAM

Notice the natural progression in the disciples' training program. At first, they simply follow Jesus, gleaning from His sermons and listening to His instructions along with a larger group of disciples. They apparently did not do this full-time but as opportunity allowed in the course of their regular lives. Next, Jesus calls them to leave everything and follow Him exclusively. Jesus then selects twelve men out of that group of full-time disciples, identifies them as apostles, and begins to focus most of His energies on their personal instruction. Later, He will gift them with authority and miracle power. Finally, He will send them out. At first, this involves them going out on short-term missions projects and reporting back. But when Jesus leaves to return to the Father, they will go out for good on their own.<sup>4</sup>



Second, the disciples were tasked with *edifying the church*. In Ephesians 4:11-12, the apostle Paul wrote, "[Jesus] Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." The twelve disciples were the original Christian teachers and preachers in the church. Their teaching, as recorded in the New Testament, is the only rule by which sound doctrine can be tested, even today.

Third, the disciples were tasked with being *examples of virtue*. In Ephesians 3:5, Paul calls them "holy apostles." They set a standard for godliness and spirituality and were the first examples for believers to emulate. They were men of character and integrity who set the standard for all who would subsequently become leaders in the church.

- Read 2 Timothy 4:2-4. What are Jesus' disciples everywhere tasked to do when it comes to preaching the gospel and equipping people with doctrine?

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- Read Ephesians 4:29–32. What does Paul say in this passage about how followers of Jesus are to edify one another in the church?

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- Read 1 Peter 1:13–16. How are disciples of Jesus tasked with being an example of virtue to the world? What does it mean to be “holy” in your conduct?

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- What is the difference between a listener—someone who is simply part of the crowd—and a true disciple of Christ? What caused that shift in your life?

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## CONSIDERING YOUR STORY

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26–29. In Paul’s day, the gospel was deemed by many to be a foolish message. The apostles were seen as unsophisticated preachers. However, as Paul notes in this passage, God often works in ways that are considered foolish and incomprehensible by the world. Even today, His favorite instruments are often the “nobodies” that the world overlooks!



## APPLYING TO YOUR LIFE

The twelve easy-to-overlook commoners whom Jesus called, trained, and sent out into the world as His disciples would never have been chosen by any other religious leader in history. Yet these are the men Jesus sought out for service in His kingdom! In the same way, know that God has not overlooked you. He has plans for *everyone* who says yes to Him. Given this, how are you preparing your heart, mind, and will for a lifetime in His service?

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### CLOSING PRAYER

*Lord Jesus, You haven't just called me to salvation; You've called me to a life of service to You. Thank You for seeing me even when others don't—for giving me real purpose in Your kingdom. Please open my eyes to the opportunities You're providing to share Your love and truth with others. And help me to look to You for the courage, the wisdom, and the responsiveness I need to carry out Your mission in this world. In Your powerful name. Amen.*

#### Notes

1. Two disciples of John the Baptist are mentioned in John 1:35–42 as becoming disciples of Jesus, but only Andrew is named in the text (see verse 40). Some believe the other disciple was John, who is often unnamed in the Gospel (see 13:23), while some believe it was Philip (based on 1:43).
2. John MacArthur, author and general editor, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), note on John 1:29.
3. MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, note on Matthew 17:20.
4. John MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 22.