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SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE APOSTLES

As Jesus started His unique work on earth, a number of men and women started following him as His disciples. Out of that group he prayerfully selected twelve men to be His apostles: *One day soon afterward Jesus went up on a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night. At daybreak he called together all of his disciples and chose twelve of them to be his apostles.* (Luke 6:12-16, And see Acts 1:21) *Apostolos* in Greek means: “One who is sent,” or “Messenger.” An apostle is like an ambassador or messenger representing the one who sends him.

THEIR QUALIFICATIONS

The twelve apostles were working men, they were not from the politically privileged or the religiously trained elite: *The members of the council (the Sanhedrin) could see....that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus.* (Acts 4:13)

Mark’s description of the call of the twelve contains some interesting insights: *Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve – designating them apostles - that they might be with him, and that he might send them out.....* (Mark 3:14-18) Note: (1) their role in the church was chosen by God (2) they responded in humility and obedience (3) the highest call on their lives was to spend time with Jesus (*that they might be with him*).

Included in the twelve were two sets of brothers who are identified as fishermen: Simon Peter and Andrew, and James and John. James and John are called “sons of Zebedee.” Zebedee means thunder, which probably describes their father’s personality and temper. If you are “sons of Thunder,” that likely says something about your personality also.

One of the men Jesus called, Levi or Matthew, was a government employee, a tax-collector. That means he represented the hated Romans who occupied and controlled the land, and it means that he was despised as a collaborator and traitor to his own people. Another of the apostles was Simon the Zealot. The Zealots were like a political party, they were Jewish militants and nationalists who thought that violence and war were needed to drive the Romans out of their country.

We are not told what Judas Iscariot did before he became an apostle, but it is clear from a number of scriptures that Jesus knew exactly who and what Judas was. Jesus said, *I chose the twelve of you, and one is a devil.* (John 6:70)

Jesus clearly understood Judas’ betrayal as part of God’s plan for redemption, but Jesus loved Judas and even called

him “friend” at the time Judas brought Roman soldiers to the garden and betrayed Jesus with a kiss (Matthew 26:50). The mystery of God’s sovereignty and man’s free will is demonstrated here, and we know from Scripture that Judas had free will and chose to resist God’s grace and to betray the Savior. The frightening judgment on Judas’ life was that, *It would have been better if he had never been born.* In light of this somber statement, we certainly need to consider that we each have free will and will be held accountable for our choices. As you know, following Jesus’ death on the cross Judas died by hanging himself.

The eleven remaining apostles prayed, cast lots, and chose Matthias to replace Judas. Matthias’ name is not mentioned again in the Bible, and many Bible students think that the apostles moved too fast, that although Paul was not one of those who traveled with Jesus from the beginning, he was the man that God chose to replace Judas as one of the twelve. Of course, other men were subsequently called by God to be apostles, including Paul: *This letter is from Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus.* (Ephesians 1:1) *But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this...*(Acts 14:14) *Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers.* (Ephesians 4:11)

THE MESSAGE OF THE APOSTLES

What message was it exactly that the apostles were responsible to pass on to the world? The New Living Testament scholars say that the apostles proclaimed: (1) that the Old Testament prophecies and promises had been fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is the Messiah. (2) that the apostles themselves were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ entire public ministry and were chosen to represent him (3) that all people (Gentiles as well as Jews) are called to repent of their sins and have faith in God through Christ. (4) that salvation and the presence of the Holy Spirit are promised to those who respond to this Good News. What an amazing message! What amazing Good News! That we can be forgiven for our sins and made acceptable to our Creator and receive the promise of heaven because of what Jesus Christ did. Wow! Praise the Lord indeed!

THE AUTHORITY GIVEN TO THE APOSTLES

The apostles were not only given a message, they were given authority. *Then he appointed twelve, that they might be with him, and that he might send them out to preach and to have power (delegated authority) to heal the sick and to cast out demons.* (Mark 3:14-15) *And as you go, preach, saying ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.* (Matthew 10:7-8)

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF THE APOSTLES

The apostles have been judged by some in the church to be a bunch of stupid dunderheads, and I think that is entirely wrong. They were not highly educated, but they were very intelligent and spiritually sensitive. Jesus’ message, and the Bible as a whole, is not easy to understand and assimilate even for you and me, and we have the benefit of the New Testament and 2,000 years of study and experience by the church. Right? All of the apostles had times of confusion and doubt. What about you? Have you had times of confusion and doubt? (I haven’t had any deep struggles with doubt since late last night.) Peter was impulsive, erratic and unreliable, but he was quick to repent and ultimately had the faith and courage of a lion. Just read the epistles of first and second Peter and consider what a brilliant, humble man he became. The biggest hurdle the apostles had to overcome was their pride. That’s the biggie for you and me also. (See the article

following this study of the apostles.)

THE DEATH OF THE APOSTLES

Oh, my gosh! Jesus made fabulous promises to the apostles: fruit that will remain for eternity; abundant life; joy; peace of mind and heart; spiritual riches; mansions in glory; the approval of the Creator God. He also warned them of the cost: *If they persecuted me the leader, they will certainly persecute you the followers; you will be expelled from the synagogues and driven from town to town; you will be cursed and beaten; the time is coming when those who kill you will think they are doing God a service.* All of these terrible things happened and more.

The first to die was James, the brother of John. *About that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to persecute some from the church. Then he killed James, the brother of John, with the sword.* (Acts 12:1-2) When I became a Christian at age 30, I started reading the Bible voraciously. I remember clearly that when I read this passage from Acts 12, I was shocked. I blurted out, "Oh, no! They killed James!" and burst into tears. (What a weird guy, huh?)

We know from the Bible and from tradition that John the apostle was sentenced to work in the mines on the prison island of Patmos (sort of like Alcatraz), where he wrote the inspired epistle of Revelation. Regarding the other apostles, the traditional historical record, which may not be entirely accurate, recounts the following: Matthew was killed by the sword in Ethiopia. Mark (not one of the 12) went to Alexandria, Egypt, on a missionary trip, and there he was dragged through the streets by horses to his death. Luke (not one of the 12, but the author of Luke and Acts) was hanged in Greece. Peter – because he said he was unworthy to die in the same way as Jesus, was crucified upside down on an X-shaped cross during the purge by Nero. James (another James, not John's brother) – thrown from the pinnacle of the temple. Bartholomew – whipped to death in Armenia. Andrew - crucified in Greece. Thomas – speared in India. Jude – shot with arrows when he refused to deny Christ. Matthias – died by stoning. Paul – tortured, then beheaded by Nero at Rome in AD 67. (I wept again as I wrote down this account of the apostles.) Leading all of these good men to a sacrificial death was our master, Jesus, who died on a cross, the innocent for the guilty.

When we read about the lives of the apostles, we need to remember the price they paid to pass the Gospel down to us.

UNWORTHY SERVANTS?

Living as a citizen in the kingdom of God is a lot different than living as a citizen in the kingdom of this world. One day Jesus was telling his followers some parables that illustrate that difference when he told a story that sounds strange to our ears. He said, in Luke 17, *When a servant comes in from taking care of the sheep.....does the master thank the servant for doing what he was told to do? Of course not. In the same way, when you obey me you should say, "We are unworthy servants who have simply done our duty."*

Is God ungrateful? Doesn't He have any appreciation for the sacrifices that people make in being His followers? God is grateful, and Scripture tells us that every act of service and sacrifice will be recognized and appropriately rewarded in heaven, even a cup of cold water given for the cause of Christ. What is His point then?

This story is one of Jesus' many stories and illustrations where He was trying to protect His followers from their biggest problem – pride. What did the disciples argue about from the beginning of their time with Jesus? Who would be the greatest in His kingdom. Who would sit at His right hand in the kingdom. Even on their last night with Him in the Upper Room they were arguing about it, and Jesus got down on his knees and washed their feet to illustrate humility and servanthood.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught: *Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven.* Then He said we should not pray, give, or fast in order to be admired as great servants of God.

Think about the job that Jesus assigned to His disciples: *Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons.* Obviously, we can't do any of those things without His power. We can preach the Gospel, but there won't be any fruit unless His Spirit is at work: *No one can come to Me unless the Father draws him,* Jesus taught. Jesus also declared, *Apart from Me you can do nothing.*

It's sort of like children giving presents to their parents for Christmas. The money is from the parents, but Mom and Dad are so proud that their kids are catching on about giving. But it would ruin it if their kids started bragging about their generosity.

Another simple illustration: Tommy was an average halfback until he joined the team at Okra State College. Suddenly he started breaking state records and getting his photo in the paper. His secret was his offensive line, anchored by the center, Biff, "the Beast," Johnson. Biff was 340 lbs. of naked aggression. He opened holes in the line you could drive a truck through. When Tommy was interviewed by Sports Illustrated, he neglected to give any credit to his line or to Biff and proclaimed that he was the best, fastest, shiftiest, smartest football player in America.

On the following Saturday when Tommy's team took the field, he was shocked to see that Biff, "the Beast," was lined up with the other team and glaring as if Tommy had just slapped his mother. Suddenly Tommy went from being the best football player in America to being the most pathetic.

This is an accurate picture of what happens when we become boastful about "our" success in the game Jesus invites us to play. Biff, "the Beast," is God, and He becomes our opponent, our enemy, if we start bragging about our greatness. 1 Peter 5:5 says, *God opposes the proud but favors the humble.* Proverbs 16:5 says, *The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this, they will not go unpunished.* Another Proverb says, *God tears down the house of the proud.* There are many more warnings of the same type, but you get the point. As someone who has played the game of life with Biff on my team and then against my team (because of my stupid pride), I can personally testify that it is a lot more fun with Biff leading the blocking.

THE PRACTICE OF PAYING ATTENTION

(Recently Pastor Kirk recommended a book by Ruth Haley Barton, Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership, which is a study of the call and ministry of Moses, as being one of the best books he has ever read. I certainly agree. Following are some of her insights.)

"One day as Moses was carrying out a routine task, tending the flocks of Jethro, he ventured out a little farther than usual and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. This came after forty years of humble service as a shepherd. It was as if God had been waiting for this moment. Moses saw a bush that was burning but not consumed, and he turned aside to look. There seemed to be a cause-and-effect relationship between Moses' willingness to pay attention and God's willingness to speak. *When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush.* (Exodus 3:4) Note: God spoke because Moses stopped, paused, noticed, and turned aside!

"I remember one season in my life when stopping to notice became almost impossible. At the time I was on staff at a church where we had a lot of meetings. In fact, our days were so packed with back-to-back meetings that there was not time to take care of personal needs. One day our youngest daughter, Haley, was at home sick, and I was in such a rush that I had

not had a chance to call home and check on her. Since I couldn't be late for a certain meeting, the only thing I could do was call home while I was quite literally running through the hallways. I almost ran into another staff member running in the opposite direction, and I remember thinking: When members of the pastoral staff are running down the hallways talking on their cell phones, there is something wrong with this picture.

“I take full responsibility for that situation. I had allowed myself to get scheduled, over-scheduled, in such a way. Although I was super busy working for God (?), I didn't have any time for listening and paying attention to Him. Many of us are choosing to live lives that do not set us up to pay attention, to notice those places where God is at work and to ask ourselves what these things mean. We long for an encounter, a word, from the Lord, but we find ourselves trapped into a way of life that offers little or no opportunity for paying attention. We might ask ourselves: *How much paying attention am I doing – really? Do I have enough give to my schedule to be able to turn aside and pay attention when there is something that warrants it? Could it be because I am moving so fast that I do not have time to turn aside and look? Maybe God is trying to communicate with me, but I simply don't have enough time to slow down and listen?*

“Solitude brought Moses to a place where he had slowed down enough to pay attention to the bush that was burning in the middle of his own life. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote in her famous poem:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes –
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.

“In a profound way, our intentionality is a key ingredient determining whether we notice God everywhere or only in church or only in suffering or nowhere. It all depends on how we choose to fashion our world.

“These days there is such a glut of information and stimulation that it is often hard to know what to pay attention to. Should I take that class, read this highly recommended book, attend that conference, subscribe to this magazine, interact with this blog or website, watch this television program, read this research, search the internet just a little more? When do we create space where we can exercise some discretion about what to do with our time and decide what to choose?

“In the New Testament story of the Emmaus road, the disciples' ability to listen to what was going on inside helped them to recognize that the risen Christ was the one who had been with them as they traveled. This was a significant insight! Their willingness to pay attention to what happened within them as they interacted with the stranger on the road is what woke them up. *Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?* they asked themselves. The hope kindled within them after such a weekend of violence and death was immeasurable.

“Moments such as these are there for all of us if we simply learn to notice – moments when our awareness opens up and we see something from a spiritual perspective that somehow changes everything. In Deuteronomy God instructed the whole company of Israel to pay attention in this way when he said, *I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.* He wanted the Israelites to know that the wisdom that enables us to choose life is not something that we will find “out there,” *in heaven or across the ocean somewhere, but is very near to us – in our mouths and in our hearts* for us to notice and observe. (Deut. 30:19-20) As we become more attuned to these subtle spiritual dynamics, we are able to distinguish between what is good (what moves us toward God and his calling on our life) and what is evil (what draws us away from God).”

(Some of my (Glenn's) reflections on the above):

God's ways are subtle and nuanced. He simply does not act the way we think He will. He insists on being God and expects us to adjust to His ways, not vice-versa. While God loves us to such an extreme that He sent His Son to suffer and die for us, His presentation is so humble and self-effacing that we can easily not see Him or choose to ignore Him. He was born in a stable, not in a palace, and His grand entry into Jerusalem was on a donkey's colt, not on a stallion with a conquering army.

So God came to Elijah on the mountain not in a great wind, an earthquake, or a fire, but in a still, small voice. That's the way He comes to you and me, also, and if we do not pay attention we will not hear Him at all.

In Mark 6:47 is one of the accounts of Jesus walking on the water, on the Sea of Galilee. It's very strange. It says, *Jesus came to them in the fourth watch of the night, walking on the Sea. The disciples thought they were seeing a ghost and cried out in terror. And the report says, He would have passed by them, or He intended to pass by them if they hadn't called out to Him. Then He got into the boat with them and they knew it was Jesus Himself. Note: He would have left them thinking they were seeing a ghost if they had not called out to Him. Is that strange or what!*

Fifty years ago I was working in Dallas in the office of Mr. L. C. Porter, Vice President of Operations of the Texas & Pacific Railroad Company. Mr. Porter had several thousand employees working under him, and he was a fine man and a very intelligent man. It was while I was working in that office that I had a profound conversion experience and within five years left the railroad and started to seminary to become a Methodist pastor. Of course, during that time I started becoming sensitive to where people were in relation to Christ. As far as I could tell, Mr. Porter never gave God or Jesus Christ a passing thought.

In the course of time, Mr. Porter attended some sort of noon meeting of business men in downtown Dallas. At that

meeting, a Christian evangelist talked to all of the men about their souls and about the invitation of Christ. Mr. Porter was shaken. He came back to his office thinking deeply about the reality of God, about judgment after this life, and about the message of the Gospel. (He shared his thinking with me and a few others.) That was probably the first time in his life that Mr. Porter ever gave any serious attention to such matters. His thoughts about God and about Jesus Christ lasted for maybe a week or perhaps two, and then, since he was a very busy man, he got his attention back on the real world. The first chapter of Romans says that God “speaks” to every human being through the creation, and it implies that God also speaks to everyone through an inner intuition, and He calls people to come to Him, but that most ignore Him and pass on to other important matters. Jesus told us why people don’t have time to turn aside and find God: *Because they love the darkness rather than the light.*

God also speaks to people through dreams and visions. We have read of many Muslims coming to Christ in this way. Is every dream a message from God? No, but some are, and it is easy to ignore dreams as if they are a ghost or psychological nonsense.

Dear friends, God speaks to us in many subtle ways, and we need to pay attention.

God Bless

Glenn

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