

“Called to Be Disciples,” Luke 6:12-16 (Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019)

In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.¹³ And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles: ¹⁴ Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, ¹⁵ and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot, ¹⁶ and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

PRAY

Today is Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. I hope you can make it to our lunchtime services at the church office each day this week as we prepare to celebrate Easter morning.

Our text isn't a traditional Palm Sunday text, though I will talk about one later in the sermon. Instead it is the occasion when Jesus chose the Twelve: the men who would be his closest, most trusted band of followers.

As I worked on my sermon for today this text seemed especially important for a town like ours, because here it's not always easy to know who really is a follower of Jesus. It's not always easy to distinguish between the genuine and the counterfeit in Oxford. Jesus himself tells us this will be an issue throughout the centuries. He says in Matthew 7:21, ²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

One reason, and perhaps it's the main reason, why it's hard to distinguish between the true and the counterfeit in our town is because it's not only broadly accepted to be a Christian in our community. It's often celebrated to be a Christian.

Last week at the Pavilion on campus there was a large Christian gathering. I was there, along with at least five thousand others. Many of you were there I'm sure. It was a remarkable night.

But the next day I saw where a local business offered a 50% discount on some of its products if you made a decision for Christ the night before at the Pavilion. I can't imagine a business in San Francisco, or London, or Tokyo running a similar promotion. There might be protests in those global cities if you did something like that.

This sermon might not be necessary in those parts of the world where Christianity is despised, but where it is still celebrated I think it's vitally important to distinguish between the genuine and the counterfeit. We need to know the difference between professing to be a follower of Jesus (when honestly we're just following the crowd and enjoying the energy of it) and actually being a follower of Jesus (no matter what it costs us). Now, I'm not preaching this sermon so you can walk around town next week and say, “See her over there – she's not a Christian. I always thought she was phony but after J.D.'s sermon now I'm sure.” No, I only want us to apply this sermon to our own hearts. We don't have any business judging anyone else's faith, but we desperately need to evaluate our own.

Two points: who can be a disciple of Jesus? Second, how can you be sure you are a disciple of Jesus?

First, who can be a disciple of Jesus? Before we answer that question we need to be clear on what the word “disciple” even means. The word simply means “student,” or “learner.” Jesus is the teacher, the Twelve are his students.

But notice in verse 13 Jesus also designates the Twelve, who were chosen from among the disciples (so there were many more than twelve by this point) as “apostles,” and the word “apostle” means “the sent ones.”

I think a lot of us who grew up in church got the impression that the Twelve were disciples, only students, until the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2, and then they became apostles, the sent ones. However, that’s not what Luke says. The Twelve were sent as soon as they were chosen.

Matthew, in his account, uses these terms interchangeably. Matthew 10:1-2: “And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. ² The names of the twelve apostles are these ...” Matthew writes as if there’s no difference between being a disciple and being an apostle.

It is true that there are no capital “A” apostles in the church today, because capital “A” apostles were the men who wrote the New Testament, and that office is now closed and that gift of revelation has long since ceased. Yet it is also true that all followers of Jesus Christ are both disciples and lowercase “a” apostles. Those two words describe different functions that should be present in every Christian.

Every Christian must be a disciple, which means every Christian must be a student. That means she learns, she studies the Bible, she reflects on life, and she grows in knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. Disciples, in short, use their head.

But every Christian must also be an apostle, which means every Christian is one who is sent. That means out of love for others and God she goes forth into the community and she serves and evangelizes. Apostles, in short, use their hearts.

A genuine Christian is always two things: a student and sent. It must be both, not one or the other. Students that aren’t sent, who are all head and no heart, don’t honor the Lord. Sure, they love books and Bible studies and listening to sermons, but they aren’t applying that knowledge in love and good deeds. That knowledge doesn’t bless.

Likewise sent people who aren’t students, all heart and no head, don’t help either. They mean well, they go out into the world with gusto, but make a mess of situation after situation because they can’t distinguish truth from falsehood, right doctrine from the lies of the enemy. They rely instead on the power of emotions, which are dangerously fickle and easily manipulated by the frailties of the flesh.

Therefore, to answer the question of point one: anyone who is willing to be both a student of Jesus Christ and sent by Jesus Christ can be a disciple. That does not mean that before you can become a Christian you must actually be a student and be sent, and certainly does not mean before you can become a Christian you must be good at or consistent about those things. Just have a heart that is willing and you can be a disciple of Jesus.

There are no other limitations on discipleship, and to see just how wide open Jesus' call for disciples is let's look now at the Twelve. We don't know much about most of these men, but from what we do know we can see *five characteristics* that in other fields or endeavors might rule certain people out, but that have no bearing on whether or not one can be a disciple of Jesus.

First, money. One's socio-economic status. Out of the Twelve, probably only one, Matthew, would have been considered wealthy. Matthew was a tax collector (we read that in Matthew 10:3), and we know that tax collectors were often in a position to make a lot of money. The other eleven, at best would have been middle of the road. Simon, Andrew, James, and John were all fishermen. They would have been able to feed their families, but that was about it. We don't know the professions of the other seven, but perhaps one or more of them were completely impoverished. Regardless, money (either having it or not) is no limitation to discipleship.

Second, temperament. First among the disciples is Peter, impetuous Peter, speak-first-and-ask-questions-later Peter. Sure-of-himself Peter. Then you have James and John. In Luke 9 we read they are ready to pull an Elijah and call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village because the people did not welcome Jesus appropriately. They are aggressive, quick-tempered.

Yet we also see among the Twelve Nathanael. In John 1, Jesus meets Nathanael for the first time and says, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!"⁴⁸ Nathanael said to him, 'How do you know me?' Jesus answered him, 'Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.'" John 1:47-48. And Nathanael was astonished. Nathanael had been sitting under a fig tree, we don't know for sure what he was doing but whatever it was he was alone, probably lost in thought about something important to him. He's the reflective, quiet type. You'd never catch Peter pondering life under a fig tree, yet Nathanael is a disciple.

We see Judas the son of James, also called Thaddaeus elsewhere. In John 14:22 he asks Jesus, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" It seems he's concerned how people outside of Israel will respond to Jesus. He's tender-hearted. James and John would never worry about that. If you didn't respond to Jesus you could just burn as far as they were concerned. No matter your temperament, you can be a follower of Jesus.

Third, politics. Matthew, as we've already seen, is a tax collector. That meant he was an employee of Rome. Matthew's job was to take money from his people, the Jews, by force if necessary, and give it to Rome to help pay for the cost of occupying Israel. As you can imagine, that would have made Matthew an extraordinarily unpopular man among his fellow Israelites. Especially among one particular political group known as the Zealots. They hated being under the thumb of Rome, and their sole purpose was rebellion against and resistance to the Romans.

Yet among the disciples there was a man named Simon *the Zealot*. In first-century Israel, you could not find two people more politically opposite than Matthew and Simon the Zealot. Can you imagine how suspicious they must have been of one another? Imagine a supporter of President Trump, who loves to wear his “Make America Great Again” hat and who has a “Build the Wall” bumper sticker on his car, hired to work in a two-person office with a devoted supporter of Hillary Clinton, who every casual Friday wears his “I’m With Her” tee shirt? As awkward as that would be, it would pale in comparison to the tension surrounding Matthew and Simon. Yet Jesus called them both.

Fourth, gender. The original Twelve were all men, but soon thereafter we read of female disciples. As Jesus traveled through Israel we read, “And the twelve were with him, ² and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³ and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.” Luke 8:1b-3. Many historians have noted how egalitarian the early church was and how much responsibility women were given in the mission, far more responsibility than women had in society at large.

Fifth, and finally, race. The original Twelve were all Jewish, but that also changed quickly. We read of Samaritans in Acts 8 and Romans such as the centurion named Cornelius in Acts 10 coming to faith in Christ. Then there is this verse at the beginning of Acts 13: “Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.” Acts 13:1.

Niger means “black” in Latin, so almost certainly he was a dark-skinned man from Africa. Lucius was also an African – Cyrene was in what we now call Libya. Almost as soon as the church begins, we see tremendous racial diversity among the disciples.

When it comes to who can be a disciple, therefore, money, temperament, politics, gender, and race (and that’s a pretty inclusive list of possible barriers) are irrelevant. ***Whosoever would be a disciple can be one.***

Second, how can you be sure you are a disciple? Now we hear that and many of us automatically think we know the answer: we must repent of our sins and trust in Christ.

We must believe that we are sinners, that we’ve lived a life displeasing to God and we now stand justly under his wrath. But we also believe that because God is good and gracious he sent his son, the sinless son of God, Jesus Christ, to live and walk among us. Jesus lived the life we should have lived and on the cross died the death we deserved to die to bear the wrath of God in our place. We believe that God raised Jesus from the dead as proof of the acceptance of Jesus as our atoning sacrifice, and in so doing reconciled us to God. When we believe that, it is just as if we’d never sinned. We are counted as perfect in God’s sight.

That is ***how you become*** a disciple, that is ***how you become*** a Christian. ***But that does not mean you are going to be certain, in that moment first believe, you are a disciple.*** Why do I say that?

Because of the terrifying example of Judas Iscariot in Luke 6:16. He's always last in the list of twelve, and for good reason. Judas ultimately betrayed Jesus into the hands of his killers.

Judas served with the Twelve and with Jesus for three years, but it was never obvious to anyone that Judas would wind up being a traitor. At the Last Supper, the night he is betrayed by Judas, Jesus gathers with the Twelve and says, "But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. ²² For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!" Luke 22:21-22. What do the other eleven disciples say?

Do they say, "We know who it is. It's Judas! We've always known he was different. We all went out preaching, but when Judas preached no one ever got saved. We all went out healing, but no one ever got better when he laid hands on them. We all listened to you, Jesus. Judas was the only one who argued with you and talked about you behind your back."

No, instead we read, "And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this." Luke 22:23. They didn't even suspect Judas! ***Don't you think by that point Judas believed he'd repented of his sins and trusted Christ?*** Don't you think Judas would have said he was certain he was a true disciple? Of course he did, ***but he was deceived.***

As I mentioned earlier there was a big, Christian event at the Pavilion last week. It was great in so many ways. Some students at Ole Miss worked very hard to pull it off. The band was outstanding at what they do and the type of music they play. The speaker faithfully taught the Bible. It may have been the first time some in the audience ever heard the Bible taught like that. There so much to be thankful for that night.

But one thing did concern me: the speaker, contrary to the plan for the night, invited everyone in the room who wanted to become a Christian to walk down and kneel in front of the stage. Hundreds of people did. There were not a few tears. It was clearly an emotional experience for them. Yet the speaker didn't make it super clear what walking down front had to do with becoming a Christian, so as the people streamed forward I wondered, "Do they know these powerful emotions do not necessarily mean they are now disciples of Jesus?"

Why would I say ***that?*** Today is Palm Sunday. On the first Palm Sunday two thousand years ago Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. It's called his Triumphal Entry. "And as he rode along, they spread their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, ³⁸ saying, 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!'" Luke 19:36-38.

It must have been a powerful, emotional experience for everyone involved. ***Yet where was the multitude of followers just five days later?*** Where were they on Good Friday, when Jesus – the man they lauded as the savior of God's people – was dying on the cross? ***Where were they?***

I'll tell you where they were: they had either abandoned Jesus and gone home or they were shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" ***but they were not disciples of Jesus.*** They had a powerful, emotional experience, ***but they were deceived if they thought they were disciples.***

In Mark 4, Jesus describes this phenomenon in the parable of the sower. He talks about a farmer who sows seed, and some seed falls on rocky ground with little soil. It sprouts quickly but then dies when the sun scorches it.

Later, when they were alone, Jesus explained the meaning of parable to the disciples. The sower, he said, sows the word of God. ¹⁶“Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy [with excitement and enthusiasm]. ¹⁷But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.” Mark 4:16-17 (NIV 1984).

Friends, an emotional, joyful response to hearing the gospel message is no guarantee that you are actually a disciple of Jesus.

So we hear that and say, “OK, I don’t want to be deceived, like Judas. I don’t want to be like the fickle crowds on Palm Sunday, cheering for Jesus one day and then abandoning him or wanting to kill him the next. How can I be sure I am a disciple?”

Let’s look back at the Twelve. As you read the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John carefully, you notice something: the disciples are never alone. You almost always see them in groups. Sometimes it’s all twelve, sometimes it’s three, sometimes they are sent out two by two, but they are hardly ever alone.

In fact, I think there is only one time you see a disciple by himself. It’s Wednesday of Holy Week. “Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests [alone] ¹⁵and said, ‘What will you give me if I deliver him over to you [meaning, ‘What will you give me if I betray Jesus to you’]?’ And they paid him thirty pieces of silver.” Matthew 26:14-15. What if Judas had gone to the other disciples that day and said, “Guys, I have had some horrible thoughts run through my mind today, some incredibly wicked thoughts. I don’t need to be by myself today. Will you pray for me? And maybe will a few of you just sit with me?”

When Paul in the book of Acts is traveling throughout the world spreading the gospel, he never shows up in a town, has a big rally one night, and then immediately leaves to go to the next event. Instead, he stays in each city for several weeks, or months, and sometimes for years, gathering disciples into groups **called churches**, and setting over them trustworthy men called pastors or elders to make sure the Bible was faithfully taught and to make sure the people in those churches don’t wander away from the faith.

If you are ever going to be a disciple of Jesus you must repent of your sins and trust Christ, no doubt about that. That’s how you become a disciple. ***But in Christianity we are called to be a part of the community of faith.*** If you want to be sure you are a **disciple instead of just deceived**, then commit yourself to other disciples, elders, and pastors. Is it possible to be a disciple outside the community of faith? Yes. That happens. Is it possible to be in the church and deceived? Yes. But the pattern we find in the New Testament is that we are called to be disciples in the community of faith, that in the normal course of events that’s how you become certain, and that is the pattern we would wisely follow.

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.
²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” Hebrews 10:23-25.

One of my favorite figures from early church history is Ignatius, pastor of the church in Antioch in what is now the southernmost part of Turkey. Around the year 115, during a time of persecution when Ignatius was about eighty years old, the Roman authorities arrested him, bound him in chains, and brought him to Rome for execution. He was to be devoured by wild animals.

On the way, Ignatius wrote letters to various churches in the area. In one of the letters he wrote these words: “I do have one prayer request. Pray that I’ll have strength in my soul and in my body, so that I won’t just give lip service to martyrdom but will actually desire to go through with it. I don’t want to merely call myself a Christian – I want to back it up when it counts ... Oh may I rejoice in those wild beasts awaiting me! I do pray they will be done with me very quickly. In fact, I will coax them to come eat me up right away. I hope they won’t behave timidly like they sometimes do ... Please bear with me here, friends. I really do know what is best for me. I am only now beginning to understand what it means to be a disciple.”

Now you and I probably won’t suffer that kind of state-sponsored persecution for being a disciple. We might, but probably not. But you know what? We may get snared by some sin and it will try and drag us away from Jesus. At the very least we will be tempted to wander away from the faith because of the demands of work, or family, or school, or money.

So what can we do right now, before that happens? We can make sure some people are around us who know and love us and who can pray that we will have strength in our souls and bodies so we won’t just give lip service to Christianity but instead we will actually understand what it means to be a disciple. ***We want to be disciples, not deceived.*** We want to be faithful like Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas (Judas the son of James, not the other one). We know those men remained faithful to Jesus all the way up to their death.

Let’s be sure we are following Jesus and not just the crowd. Let’s take the steps we need to take today to make sure we remain faithful to Jesus the rest of our days, because Jesus in his grace and mercy has been so unfailingly faithful to us. AMEN