

A Background Disciple

Matthew 10:1-4

When he was only 20 years old, Charles Spurgeon was called to the pastorate of London's famed New Park Street Chapel. It was the largest Baptist congregation in London at the time, although it had dwindled in numbers for several years. Within just a few months, his ability as a preacher made him famous. His sermons were so popular that they were published in printed form every week with a very high circulation. Before he died at the age of 57, he had preached nearly 3,600 sermons and published 49 volumes of commentaries, sayings, anecdotes, illustrations and devotions. To this very day, his sermons and books are being used by God to draw men and women to Christ.

But let's think about **John** Spurgeon for a moment. John was Charles' father. He also was a pastor and the son of a pastor. But it's been pointed out that we would never have heard of John Spurgeon had his son not become so famous. He would have served his congregation well and preached the Word faithfully, but he would have died without any of us ever having heard of him.

Through the years, there have been hundreds and thousands of pastors, and regular Christians, like him who have served the Lord faithfully and sincerely without any notice from the world. Someone has pointed out that the Lord never says "Well done, good and famous servant, but He does say "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Steven Cole in "Leadership," Vol. 7, no. 3).

There are many, many Christians who serve the Lord without any recognition or earthly reward. Today let's focus on one of them in Scripture who did everything required of him and more, and did it faithfully, but did not receive much more in the way of recognition beyond a brief mention. He was known as James, the son of Alphaeus. Who was **he**? You may have heard that name before. Do you recognize that name as belonging to one of the twelve disciples of Jesus? If you don't please don't feel too badly about it. Not many people do.

Out of the twelve men whom Jesus called out to be His disciples, six are not very well-known: Philip, Nathanael (Bartholomew), Matthew (Levi), Thaddeus (Judas), Simon the Zealot, and James the son of Alphaeus. Out of those six, James, the son of Alphaeus, is perhaps the least known of all. The Scripture tells us almost nothing about him, and the traditions about him are unreliable.

From Scripture we do know a few things: He had two brothers who were also disciples of Jesus, whose names were Matthew and James. His mother was one of the women who followed Christ. We don't know anything about his father except that his name was Alphaeus.

Tradition says that this James was a tax-collector like his brother Matthew. He has been called James the Less, James the Younger, and James the Little. And though his name is not mentioned specifically in other places, the Scripture does imply several things about James the son of Alphaeus. We know, for instance, that Jesus included him in the choice of the twelve disciples, after Jesus had spent the entire night in prayer. We know from Matthew 10:1 that along with the others, James received power against the unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease. James is named in Acts 1 as being present in that upper room where the disciples "*continued with one accord in prayer and supplication.*" And Acts 2:1 implies that James was present on that Great Day of Pentecost, when the house was filled with the sound of a mighty rushing wind.

And that's about it. We know nothing of his death, or where he preached the Gospel, only that he preached it. His name is not mentioned as causing Jesus any great anxiety. He is not pointed out because he denied Jesus as did Peter. He is not singled out as being the instigator when the disciples were arguing among themselves as to who was the greatest. He was not the leader of the small band of disciples. He didn't make any stirring speeches.

He was a background disciple. He was among the first in a long line of disciples who have not been in the forefront, who would not be remembered for great deeds of accomplishment, but who have been "background disciples." Most Christians fall into that category.

Some men and women have such powerful personalities that they overwhelm everyone else. They leave indelible impressions on the minds of everyone they see. These are the people who are always elected to leadership positions. But most of us are not that way. Most of us are inconspicuous, ordinary people who seek to honor our Lord Jesus with our faithfulness and loyalty to His cause.

Just talking about their example will do us no good unless we find something to apply to our own lives. And I think this is it: that in the example of James the son of Alphaeus, and in the lives of countless other background disciples just like him, we can learn some important truths about being a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

1 Being a true disciple of Jesus does not mean:

a. that you will always be well-known

In years past there have been a number of people who were celebrities who have come to faith in Christ. Churches have glamorized new Christians who had been on drugs, who were alcoholics, who were murderers, people who had a dramatic testimony to give. We've oohed and aahed over people like that. And it is a good thing for us to know that we worship a Christ who has the power to change lives in a dramatic way like that. But there are countless numbers of people who come to Christ quietly, with no fanfare, people who were relatively unknown before they accepted Christ and who are relatively unknown now. Simply being a disciple of Christ does not mean that you will be well-known or famous, as is proven by the fact that half of the original twelve disciples are virtually unknown today.

Sure there are men and women who inspire us with their accomplishments for Christ in today's world, and there are accounts of men and women in the Bible whose courage and loyalty to God and to Christ were breathtaking. But we are not all like that, and it is not the will of God that we all *be* like that.

The Lincoln Cathedral in England is approximately 800 years old. It is built of limestone, and one of the most striking features about the cathedral is the magnificence and beauty of the architecture of two towers that grace the west front of the cathedral. But no one knows who built them. That information has been lost in the mists of time. Some of the greatest works in the Kingdom of God are done by people who receive no acclaim, no praise, and no glory.

In every church there are members who could be compared to the Sons of Thunder, to get things moving and push the church forward. There are members who are like Apollos in the book of Acts, able to move entire crowds with their eloquence. There are deep thinkers like Paul, and there are those who speak their minds, like Peter. Then there are those like James the son of Alphaeus, always there, always dependable, always faithful. God needs all kinds to get His work done, but so many times the acclaim goes to those out in front. Being a true disciple of Christ does not guarantee that you will be well-known.

b. that you will always be talented

There is a misconception along this line as well. We think that just because we can't sing like a bird, or paint like Michelangelo, or preach like Billy Graham, that we can't be used effectively as a disciple of Christ. It is true that there are many,

many talented Christians who use their God-given abilities for the glory of God. But it is just as true that there are many, many more Christians who have no outstanding talents and abilities, but who do have the time to give to help someone in need, who do have a smile to share with someone, who do have a love for Christ in their hearts that is evidenced by their loyalty.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a poem once that he entitled “Fable.” In that poem he describes a quarrel between a mountain and a squirrel. The mountain is boasting of his bigness, compared to the size of the squirrel. But then the squirrel ends the argument with these words: *“If I’m not so large as you, You are not so small as I; And not half so spry. I’ll not deny you make A very pretty squirrel track; Talents differ; all is well and wisely put; If I cannot carry forests on my back, Neither can you crack a nut.”*

You see, we each have a place in the Kingdom of God, and we should see to it that we occupy that place to our fullest capacity. When we stand before God, He will not be interested in whether or not we were able to sing, or teach or preach or lead. He will be interested first, in our faith in Christ, and second, in our faithfulness to Christ.

No, being a true disciple of Christ does not guarantee that you will be talented.

c. that you will be a leader of people.

Who were some of the leaders of God’s people in the Bible? There was Abraham. Moses led the Hebrew people out of Egypt. Joshua led the people into Canaan. Gideon was a leader. Elisha and Elijah both were leaders. Paul was a leader both before and after he was reborn. Leaders are necessary for God’s work, but too many times you and I look at these characters out of the Bible, and never see the people whose roles were not as great, who led no armies, conquered no cities, built no temples, and preached no sermons. They are there; the pages of the Bible are filled with their stories. And their stories teach us that you do not have to be a leader in order to be a disciple of Christ.

James the son of Alphaeus was no leader, and yet Jesus chose him. Why? Because Jesus knew that He could rely on James. He could count on James to be there, to be dependable, to be willing to be in the background, yet available for service whenever and however Jesus needed him—even if it was only to gather up the fragments of bread after Jesus fed the five thousand, even if it was only to man the oars of the boat that carried Jesus across the Sea of Galilee.

No, being a disciple of Christ does not guarantee that you will be a leader of men.

2 **Being a true disciple of Christ *does* mean:**

a. that you will be faithful.

James was faithful, and this probably more than anything else qualified James to be a disciple. When Jesus told the parable of the talents, he had the master in the parable say to the servants who had proven themselves to be good stewards, “Well done!” But what did the master call his servants? Good and popular? Good and wealthy? Good and talented? No! He called them “Good and *faithful.*”

Faithfulness is what Jesus demands of His disciples. Do you consider yourself faithful? Here is a little test for faithfulness that I clipped out of a church newsletter once: “Is a car that starts once out of seven times faithful? Is a refrigerator that quits for a day now and then faithful?”

“Is your paper boy faithful if he misses you with the paper every fourth day? If you fail to come to work two days each week would you be faithful to your job? If your hot water heater greeted you with cold water one morning a week, would you say it was dependable? If you are not regularly present for Bible study and worship in God’s House, can you say that you are faithful?” *(Source Unknown)*

But faithfulness extends to touch all of life. It influences those people around us, those people we truly love.

b. that you will be humble.

Stephen Crane, who wrote “*The Red Badge of Courage,*” also wrote a poem entitled “The Blades of Grass”:

*In Heaven,
Some little blades of grass
Stood before God.
“What did you do?”
Then all save one of the little blades
Began eagerly to relate
The merits of their lives.
This one stayed a small way behind,
Ashamed.*

*Presently, God said,
“And what did you do?”
The little blade answered, “Oh, my Lord,
Memory is bitter to me,
For, if I did good deeds,
I know not one of them.”
Then God, in all His splendor,
Arose from His throne.
“Oh, best little blade of grass!” He said.*

James the son of Alphaeus was like that blade of grass. Countless others since James have been like that blade of grass. What does the Bible say about humility? Once Jesus said to His disciples, *“Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves”* (Luke 22:26). Paul, in his letter to the Romans, said, *“I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment....”* (12:3). James wrote *“Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you”* (4:10).

You see, humility is not an option for the disciple of Christ! Being a true disciple of Jesus means that you will be humble, not seeking gain for yourself, but seeking to glorify Christ, to lift Him up in your life.

c. that you will be rewarded.

Your labors as a disciple of Christ may go unnoticed, even by fellow believers, but they will never go unrewarded by Christ. Revelation 21:4 tells us that the name of James is engraved on the twelve pillars of the Eternal City: *“And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”* Revelation 3:21 promises a reward as well: *“He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.”* Revelation 2:10 records the words of Jesus: *“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*

1 Peter 5:4 reads, *“And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory.”*

You may never see your name in lights, or even in the headlines of the newspaper. But you can be assured that your name is found written in the Lamb’s Book of Life, and that as He has promised, Jesus will reward you for your loyalty and faithfulness. Being a true disciple of Christ means that you will be **rewarded**. It may or may not come in this present life. Any honors or accolades any of us might

receive dim in comparison to that glittering crown of glory which will one day be placed upon our heads, and which we in turn will cast at the feet of Jesus.

Do you claim to be a true disciple of Christ? If not, won't you join the ranks of the true followers of Christ, today?