

"Learning Discipleship from the Disciples"
James the Younger: Apostle of the Unknown
Matthew 9:35-10:8; 27:55-56 (Mark 15:40)
John Breon

We know very little about this apostle, James son of Alphaeus. He's mentioned by name only in the lists of apostles and, probably, in another list of names from the crucifixion scene. There he's identified as a son of Mary and brother of Joses. He's called James the Less or the Younger. This helps distinguish him from the other apostle named James, who was a son of Zebedee and is sometimes called James the Greater. This James is also different from James the brother of Jesus who became a leader in the Jerusalem church after Jesus' resurrection. So we know this much about James the Younger: his father's name was Alphaeus, his mother's name was Mary and his brother's name was Joses or Joseph.

Kenneth Wyatt wanted to capture this sense of James being unknown in his painting, so he portrays him with his face hidden. Wyatt also reflects a tradition that James was a man of prayer, so he's pictured praying. The model for James was a man named Guy Wilkinson who worked in manufacturing doors. He was originally from Oklahoma and was raised at a boys' ranch. He became a follower of Christ when he was thirteen.

More of us can probably identify with this apostle than with some of the others. His obscurity makes him more relatable because most of us are not going to be well-known beyond our circle of family, friends, and community. You may feel that because you're not famous that you're not as important. You may feel that your work is not as valuable as someone else's. But James reminds us that quiet, steady, faithful work, even work that's hidden, is valuable and important.

Because we do know that James was an apostle. So we know that at some point he met Jesus and began following him. Later Jesus chose him, called him, and sent him out in ministry with the others. As we look at this passage that includes a list of apostles, we'll see something of the ministry of James and the other apostles. And, we'll see something of what it means to be disciples of Jesus now.

Jesus is the model for the life and ministry of disciples. From the crowds that followed him, Jesus chose a select group to accompany him, watch him, learn from him, and reproduce his ministry.

John Wimber tells about his grandfather who trained Tennessee walking horses. Those horses have a remarkable high-strutting gait, different from any other horse. One day Wimber's grandfather was working on a horse with a problem gait. He hitched a pacer—a horse with a correct gait—to the horse with the problem and let them walk together. After a few days, the problem horse's gait became consistent, just like the pacer's. Jesus trained the Twelve this way. They lived with him and began living like him (*Power Evangelism* 110).

In this passage we see Jesus gathering and sending twelve disciples on a special mission. Now is the time for them to put into practice what they have been learning from Jesus and observing in him.

To introduce this section, Matthew summarizes Jesus' ministry. He did the same thing at 4:23. Both of these summaries introduce sections of Jesus' teaching.

Jesus was *teaching* in the synagogues. Any man over age 30 was allowed to offer an interpretation after the reading of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus did this in synagogues all over Galilee. Jesus' teaching involved describing and illustrating God's kingdom.

The content of Jesus' *preaching* was "the good news of the kingdom." Here Jesus was proclaiming the appearing and presence and availability of God's rule. He announced the long-awaited arrival of the God who would reign in human affairs. God rules among his people. That rule and reign of God is made present and actual in Jesus Christ. Jesus not only proclaims God's kingdom, he embodies it. Where the king is, there is the kingdom.

In Jesus, God's kingdom invades this present age. Jesus inaugurates God's rule in the world. He invades and begins to reclaim enemy-occupied territory. The good news that Jesus proclaims is that God is the true Ruler and we can live under God's reign rather than under the domination of evil, sin, sickness, death, and darkness.

In *healing*, Jesus demonstrates the kingdom's power. Jesus' healing activity was a visible demonstration that God's kingdom had drawn near.

People in that time associated sickness with sin. Release from sickness proved that One greater than Satan had arrived with the authority and power to rule (Robert Mounce, *Matthew Good News Commentary*). When healing accompanies the proclamation of God's rule, it's a sign to unbelievers of the presence and power of God and his kingdom. In the church, the community of believers, healing is God's gift to his children.

The key word in all of this is *compassion*. Compassion is the key to Jesus' ministry. He didn't just feel sorry for people. He was strongly and deeply moved to do something about their suffering. Jesus saw crowds of people harassed and helpless, cast down, aimless like sheep without a shepherd. And he came to be the Good Shepherd—to give guidance and care to these wandering, bruised sheep. And, he sent his disciples to minister to the "lost sheep of Israel" (Mt 9:36; 10:6).

Even Jesus couldn't have personal contact with all these needy people. He told his disciples that a great harvest was ready to be brought in. Many people were ready to be introduced to God's kingdom and to receive the new life that Jesus could give. Yet there were few workers for the harvest. So Jesus says, "Pray—ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into the field."

As we look around, we can see that there is work to be done. A great harvest still waits to be reaped.

A demographic report for the Durant and Caddo zip code areas gives a current population of 25,493. In ten years, it's projected to be 28,091. About 18% of people here indicate "My Faith Is Really Important to Me." About 21% say it's "Important to Attend Religious Services." That means almost 21,000 people in our area do not say their faith is really important and just over 20,000 do not say attending religious services is important.

Now I don't tell you that to increase our burden, but to increase our vision. There is a harvest all around us. Who will do the work of bringing in the harvest? Jesus says to ask God to send out workers into the harvest field. Do you pray for unchurched people to come to Christ and become part of the church's fellowship? Do you pray regularly for our church's outreach in the community? And for missionaries who take the good news to all kinds of people? Jesus says ask God for workers.

The very next thing Matthew records is that Jesus called his twelve disciples—those he was training. He gave them authority and *sent them out*. “Pray for workers to be sent”—“Now you go and do the work.” Prayer conditions us to God’s will. As it prepares us to share with him, God often uses us to help answer our own prayers (Myron Augsburger, *The Communicator’s Commentary: Matthew*).

Jesus begins to extend his ministry through these disciples. They’re ready to practice what he’s been teaching and showing them. Listening to Jesus teach and soaking up the blessing of being with him was not all that he intended for them.

They could no longer be just spectators. He was calling them to get involved. Discipleship is not a spectator sport. It’s not just for professionals and people who are well-known. All of us who respond to the call to follow Jesus are at the same time called to go to work in the harvest.

Recall who these disciples were that Jesus gave authority to and sent out in mission. If we struggle with whether we are adequate to carry out God’s purposes in the world, we need to remember that these first ambassadors Jesus called were totally inadequate. God uses people who recognize their own inadequacy. Those who think they have what it takes to fulfill God’s call usually end up depending on their own ability instead of on God (Craig Keener, *Matthew IVP NT Commentary*).

None of the Twelve were ministry professionals. Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John were fishermen. The only other apostle’s occupation we’re sure about is Matthew the tax collector. The rest of the disciples are rather obscure. And James the Younger is perhaps the most obscure. The group’s relationships are amazing. Matthew, the tax collector for Rome, alongside the zealous and patriotic Jewish revolutionary, Simon. One of the twelve even eventually betrayed Jesus.

This motley crew Jesus called to himself, gave them authority and sent them out. The servants were given the Master’s authority to extend his ministry into numerous towns. Having been instructed to pray for workers to be sent out into the harvest, they are now sent out by Jesus in his name—to preach the message of the kingdom and to accompany their

preaching with signs: heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons.

And they didn't go alone. It looks like Jesus paired them up as he sent them out. We know from other Gospel accounts that Jesus sometimes sent disciples out two-by-two (see Luke 10:1). Here they're named in pairs: Simon and Andrew, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew, James and Thaddaeus, Simon and Judas. Could those pairs be mission teams that Jesus sent out? Who are your partners in ministry? Who do you team up with to serve?

The miracles they do in Jesus' authority are signs to accompany the preaching of the kingdom. God's rule is the context for miracles. Part of the church's witness, our witness, involves God's supernatural working in demonstrations of his power. We can't make those things happen, but let's be open to the possibility of God working among and through us in powerful ways. Apparently, even unknown James experienced those kinds of signs and wonders as he went out in mission and ministry.

I remember my dad and my grandfather talking about working on threshing crews. They were bringing in the harvest. And there would be a large crew doing the various jobs that it took to bring the grain in from the fields, to run it through the threshing machine, and load it up to haul into market. One of the interesting things they told about was the big lunch that would be prepared for the crew. Working so hard, they needed a lot of food to keep up their energy.

God feeds us so richly. But what God feeds us is intended to energize us to work in his kingdom. We can't simply contain what God gives us. We have received freely and Jesus calls us to share just as freely with others. The disciples were to trust God for provisions, for lodging, and for words to say. God provides what we need for doing his will.

The disciples' mission is enabled by Jesus' authority and rooted in the compassion he demonstrates. They followed him in his ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. This mission is the first of many on which the disciples would go—especially after Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, and sending the Holy Spirit.

During the first couple of centuries after the New Testament era, a lot of stories were told about the apostles. Tradition developed about their ministries. Some of that seems pretty far-fetched and confused. But there are likely hints of actual events that tell us something true about the first followers of Jesus.

Legend has it that James the Less was asked to renounce Christ. Instead, he cried in a loud voice that Jesus is the Son of God. So he was thrown down from the top of the Temple. He survived the fall and started praying for those who were abusing him. They began to throw stones at him. He continued to pray for their forgiveness until a fuller, a laundryman, standing nearby clubbed him to death. The tormentors then sawed James' body in two. Symbols or emblems of this apostle are a saw and sometimes a fuller's club (Ellsworth Kalas, *The Thirteen Apostles* 54). Some point out that unknown James the Younger is remembered in glory. In John's vision of God's heavenly city, the city wall has twelve foundations, "and on them were written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Revelation 21:14).

James the Younger shows us something about being like Jesus. "Hiddenness" is an aspect of Jesus' life. Susan Muto says about this:

Though you and I may be known in our circle of family and friends, we live for the most part a spirituality that participates in the hidden life of Jesus of Nazareth. He chose to witness to this ordinary way for the first thirty years of his life, only then entering into public ministry. In the hiddenness of family life, he blessed the daily existence in and through which we too find our sanctification. (*Pathways of Spiritual Living* 29-30)

James and the other apostles show us how to minister, serve, and witness. They were doing the things they had seen Jesus do. That's a model for our own discipleship and ministry today. We spend time with our Lord and get know him. We open up to the work of his Spirit to transform our life to become like the life of Jesus.

God's kingdom is the context for discipleship. By God's Spirit in us we can have compassion. We can exercise authority as representatives of God's kingdom. We can proclaim the good news and we can meet people's real needs. God calls us to stop just soaking up blessings, to stop being spectators and to become participants in his kingdom's mission.