

## THE PEOPLE ADVANCING THE GOSPEL

Acts 1:15-26

So last week was the introduction to the book of Acts and one we looked at how every believer is in Christ equipped by the Spirit of God and is essential in the mission to advance the gospel. Every single believer equipped. Every single believer essential.

I imagine some of you might have heard that and started thinking, *“How could God use me?”*<sup>i</sup> I’m a sinner. I’m a misfit. I’m far too inadequate. Honestly, I’m just pretty ordinary. And I think after this morning you’re going to see that that way of thinking just doesn’t work because if that’s true, you’re exactly who Jesus chooses to use. He uses ordinary men and women to advance the gospel to change world. Today we’ll look at 7 characteristics of the people Jesus uses to advance the gospel in Acts 1:12-26.

*“Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying, that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the zealot, and Judas the son of James. All these were continually devoting themselves with one mind to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.”*

### I. THE DISCIPLES WAITING IN THE UPPER ROOM. (VV. 12-14)

Last week we finished with the Lord Jesus **ascending** back into heaven around Bethany, just a short walk east of Jerusalem. And just before He does, He instructed them to return to Jerusalem and stay there, **waiting to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit**, which will actually happen in Acts chapter 2. Jesus has appeared to them for **40 days** but they have a **10 day wait period** as Pentecost was held 50 days after Passover. So they are waiting prayerfully as Jesus instructed.

The reference to a **Sabbath day’s journey** is Luke’s way of saying this was just a short jaunt – couple miles east of Jerusalem. Remember, they’re used to living under the OT Law and Exodus 16:29 *“let no one go out of his place on the seventh day”*. In the OT economy, Israel was for the most part not to travel or trade because it was a day of worship. But as you can imagine some of the religious leaders went to the extreme like we saw in the gospel of Mark and started making exacting measurements on how far you could travel, limiting people them to 2,000 cubits of travel, or approximately 2/3 of a mile. Can you imagine having to count your steps like that without a smart watch? Jesus came to give people rest from burdens like that.

We see that the **disciples** are there, **Jesus’ mother** and the **other women** who faithfully followed Jesus are there, His **brothers** are there (Mary & Joseph’s kids after Jesus was born – Mark 6:3; Matt. 13:55-56), the same ones who didn’t previously believe in Him. The resurrection has apparently changed some minds. But they’re all waiting in *“the upper room.”* There’s no way to be certain, but I would imagine based on the language, this is the same room we’ve become familiar with – where they ate the last supper and Jesus first appeared to them.

And we come across an important theme in **verse 14**. The theme is that of being **one minded** (*homothymadon*). *These all with one mind; unitedly; in togetherness*. It's a favorite term of Luke uses. **5 out of 10 times he'll use it to characterize the Church**. But let's just think about why Luke mentions this and mentions these people at the same time. This is **a passage about people and the people God has chosen to carry out the mission**.

### **Characteristic #1** **Jesus chooses to use ordinary people.**

Ordinary people from all walks of life and background. All sorts of personalities.

**Peter:** Peter so far has been an impulsive, impetuous loudmouth who frequents one extreme to the other. He's been the self-appointed, self-confident spokesperson of the group. And he's got baggage because he denied Jesus before men. Most of the disciples have baggage because they all deserted Jesus recently.

**James and John:** couple of fishermen. These tempestuous two are called elsewhere, "*the sons of thunder*." They sound pleasant to be around, right? "*Hey, hope you don't mind... there's some new people that are going to be joining your life group*." "*Really? What are their names?*" "*Oh... [cough, cough – muffled voice] the sons of thunder*." Just who you want in your life group! Expect the sons of thunder to handle any disagreements.

**Matthew:** A tax collector. He's with the Roman IRS. Who doesn't love tax collectors? There were sinners and then there were tax collectors. A gospel phrase is "*tax collectors and sinners*." It's like they were their own kind of special type of sinner.<sup>ii</sup> If you're trying to reach Jewish people, you don't choose someone like Matthew. They had the reputation of traitors and thieves.

**Simon the zealot:** he's about as far as you can get from men like Matthew. Zealots were the militant wing of the Jewish independence movement<sup>iii</sup> against Rome. We would call the zealots the terrorists or assassins who would hide out in the hills and strike against Rome. I've really enjoyed that aspect of *The Chosen* series, watching Simon go from zealot to Christ-follower and how he wrestles with that. But Matthew was his enemy. Jesus says, "*Matthew and Simon on the same team? Perfect. They can learn to live the gospel and reach out to different groups of people*."

**Some of the women here:** You've got one, **Jesus' mother**, who I'm sure doesn't have the best reputation. She had Jesus before her and Joseph were official. **Mary Magdalene** had seven demons cast out of her. Her past wasn't pretty. Ex-women of the streets even followed Jesus.

I'm also guessing **Nicodemus** and **Joseph of Arimathea** are there, rich men who are trading in their positions on the Sanhedrin to follow Jesus anywhere. So officials and fishermen together.

This is quite the group! It's a motley crew of people with issues and baggage and backgrounds that no one would look at and say, "*That's going to be a great team!*" Yet, **this is who Jesus chose to be on the same team to carry, with one mind, the mission of advancing the gospel**.

### **Characteristic #2**

### **Jesus uses people who live and breathe the gospel.**

If this group was going to make any impact at all, they will have to live and breathe the gospel. Matthew and Simon living the gospel – learning to love, show grace, mercy and forgiveness as Christ had shown them. These men would be evidence that **the gospel does what the gospel is**. It brings reconciliation between man and God, and man and man.

Think about this group in light of everything going on in our culture today. The hatred, the anger, the division, the disunity, the slander. Just imagine if the Church and local churches in their communities were known *right now* for their unity *despite their differences*. Churches are to be countercultural places of gospel grace. But many churches aren't exactly known for that. They're known for divisions over crazy things like...

- fighting over the brand of the coffee
- whether or not we can use a dirt devil vacuum to clean the sanctuary or we can bring deviled eggs to the fellowship dinner
- whether to call the fellowship dinner a pot-luck or pot blessing.
- arguing over the length of the worship leader's beard and if he should have to wear shoes.
- churches have split just trying to choose a carpet color.

Jonathan Edwards says he was blessed to experience 3 revivals in the church during his lifetime and they were all snuffed out by conflict within the church.

How do we move beyond that? How do we move beyond the division and disunity in our culture? I love what Bryan Clark said: *"It's never going to happen by trying to somehow... make everybody happy. It happens when there is a vision that is so compelling, people are willing to lay aside their differences and their personal preferences to give their lives to something that will matter forever. Show me a church that's defined by conflict, I'll show you a church that has no compelling vision."* Churches in conflict have lost the vision. That's true in all our relationships. When there's conflict, it usually means we've forgotten to vision. (marriages forgetting to model Christ and the Church; relationships forgetting it's not about them but about modeling the gospel).

### **Characteristic #3**

#### **Jesus uses people who keep focused on the mission together.**

**We need individual members, differences and all, to catch the vision and the mission that matters: advancing the gospel with their words and their lives.** Paul, writing to the Romans, prayed that God would grant them *"to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Rom. 15:5-6). **One heart. One mind. Living for what really matters.**

Another major theme in Acts and characterization is that of being **devoted to prayer**. *"All these were continually devoting themselves with one mind to prayer."*

### **Characteristic #4**

#### **Jesus uses people who are devoted to prayer.**

Prayer comes up around 30 times in the book of Acts and that's a testimony in itself. The early church that changed the world was a church devoted to prayer. If the church is going to change the world today, it's not going to happen without the cost of prayer. An old, famous line is that "*we can do nothing but pray, until we have prayed.*" Anytime God has sent a revival, it's because God's people were praying!

Maybe it's helpful for us to think about the way that these disciples were praying this day. They were ordinary men and women filled with fear and excitement at the same time. They knew the Spirit would come, but didn't know when their crosses would come. Just like us, they didn't know how things would turn out. They didn't know what else to do but pray. We can relate.

## II. **PETER ADDRESSES THE GROUP OF BELIEVERS. (VV. 15-22)**

*"At this time Peter stood up among the brothers and sisters (a group of about 120 people was there together), and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry." (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out. And it became known to all the residents of Jerusalem; as a result that field was called Hakeldama in their own language, that is, Field of Blood.) "For it is written in the book of Psalms: 'May his residence be made desolate, And may there be none living in it'; and, 'May another take his office.' Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection."*

Sometime during their time together here, **Peter** stands up among this group of **about 120 people**, no doubt with more humility in his voice this time. And as he's prayerfully pouring over God's Word during this time, he acknowledges some things.

For one, He acknowledged that **everything that happened was a fulfillment of Scripture**, even going so far as to **affirm the inspiration of Scripture**. It wasn't just David that wrote the Psalm, but that the Holy Spirit through him. I find that an ironic introductory comment because very soon, the Holy Spirit is going to use some of these men to write authoritative, Spirit-inspired Scripture.

A couple of Psalms remind him that **a new apostle has to be chosen** to replace Judas, the betrayer. Remember from Mark, in a messianic kingdom promise, Jesus anticipated 12 men to sit on 12 thrones ruling over Israel someday. Right now, there's only eleven apostles. In fact, Scripture calls them **The Eleven** (Matt. 28:16; Mark 16:14). But let's take note here that **Peter is letting prayerful study of the Word guide his decision making and teaching.**

### **Characteristic #5 Jesus uses people of the Word.**

He can really use people to advance the gospel who know His Word. Spirit-filled people are people of the Word. Why? Because God's Spirit wrote it and works through it. In Acts, as they go about

sharing the good news, it's **the Word of God that works in peoples' hearts**. The first message I ever shared 100% in Spanish was from Acts and the main point I shared from it was how there is a link or a connection between the Spirit of God and the Word of God. *Hay un vinculo entre el Espiritu Santo y la Palabra de Dios*. God's Spirit works through His Word.

But moving on in **verses 18-19**, Luke gives Theophilus a **parenthetical note**, not part of Peter's speech but a historical reference by Luke to prove his record. It's not pretty but he goes into detail how after Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, about 5 weeks' wages, he was overwhelmed with remorse. Matthew says he threw the money back into the treasury and went and hanged himself.

The chief priests didn't keep the money because it's blood money – dirty money. So they used it to buy this field as a burial plot, or maybe finish purchasing it for Judas, who might've started purchasing it already with money he stole (maybe he was going to build his kingdom mansion here). Anyway, it's in his name one way or the other. And this is too much information, but historical evidence TMI, that likely Judas became bloated and when they went to cut him down, or the rope broke, or branch broke, his intestines spilled out on the fall. If this is a passage about people, this story shows us it doesn't end well for those who reject Jesus Christ. It's a hopeless state without Christ in your life.

But with the need for a new apostle, Peter acknowledges in **verse 21 he must be qualified. The two apostolic qualifications for the 12:**

1. Has to be someone who has been with them from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, starting with His baptism.
2. He had to be someone who had witnessed the resurrection while willing to be a witness.

It's important for us to take note of that because these qualifications indicate that these 12 apostles are unique and are irreplaceable today. There can be no apostolic succession based on the qualifications. The 12 have a special place in the program of God in this apostolic period to lay the foundation for the Church with their unique gifting. It's Scriptural to say they laid the foundation and we continue to building on their foundation, each of us as living stones (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:4). When we see the New Jerusalem, we'll see their 12 names written on the city's 12 foundation stones (Rev. 21:14). They will forever have a special place of authority and significance and we should be surprised as much as them that God could use them by His grace.

*“So they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all people, show which one of these two You have chosen to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.”*

### III. THE ELEVEN BECOMES THE TWELVE AGAIN. (VV. 23-26)

After looking around, they find **2 men who meet the qualifications: Joseph and Matthias**. And with two perfectly qualified men and only 1 position, they do things the OT way and **cast lots**. Nobody is sure exactly what was done, if they had numeric stones like dice, but we might think of

something like “rolling dice” or “drawing straws” or “flipping a coin.” We know the early church wasn’t Baptist, because if they were, they would’ve voted (that’s a joke).

We saw this at the cross with the soldiers casting lots for Jesus’ tunic. However this is different. This wasn’t some excited gambling scene, but it was **respectable and reasonable**. This was a **strong OT tradition** and a time-honored way of determining God’s will in Israel. Proverbs 16:33 says, *“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”* It’s a way of making decisions that will leave the parties involved without argument and they do it **prayerfully**, trusting God’s hand to be in the small things of life. I find that refreshing. They believe in the power of prayer and the reject the notion of random chance.<sup>iv</sup> The lot that is cast identifies **God’s choice**.

I do find it interesting though that this is **never seen again in the NT**. Why? Maybe because in the next chapter, the Holy Spirit comes and this way of decision-making for them ends. It’s almost as if it’s here to show us a great **contrast between how decisions were made prior to the Spirit with physical indicators,<sup>v</sup> but after the Spirit comes, He is in them leading and guiding the entire time**. I think it’s significant, showing us the transition that would take place in them.

#### **Characteristic #6** **Jesus uses people who are dependent on the Spirit.**

He is the One they depend on. He’s the One who will be energizing, teaching, and guiding these apostles. He takes these timid, fearful uncertain believers and makes them His Spirit-empowered witnesses. They go from casting lots to speaking forth the might deeds of God (Acts 2:11).

There’s a few Bible students who think the Eleven should’ve waited, thinking that Paul is the real 12<sup>th</sup> apostle but that is definitely wrong thinking. Acts itself will acknowledge Matthias as one of The Twelve (Acts 2:14; 6:2) before Paul comes on the scene.<sup>vi</sup> Paul said of himself, he was the last apostle to see resurrected Jesus, one untimely born, and by God’s grace became to apostle to the Gentiles (non-Jews)(1 Cor. 15:8; Gal. 1-2). But he would not claim to be one of the Twelve.

He would claim to be a clay jar. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:1, 7: *“Therefore having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.... But we have this treasure [the gospel] in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”* I like to think of us as cracked clay pots. Where there’s a crack, or a weakness, that’s exactly what God will use to shine through and where His power is most evident. It’s the **power perfected in weakness** principle.

#### **Characteristic #7** **Jesus uses the weak to demonstrate His power.**

That’s who all of these people are. Jars of clay Jesus chose to with treasure. A motley crew Jesus has chosen with baggage and all, just like you and me. They’re not self-confident, not-perfect, no performers... rather, just the opposite. A little timid, a little hesitant. A little rough. A little unknown. Other than Peter, James, and John, none of the others are mentioned again in the NT.<sup>vii</sup>

Since then, Church history has been filled with nameless, faceless, ordinary people.<sup>viii</sup> We don’t know who they are. But here we are because of them. We can trace all of our stories back to these

men and women in this room on that day who said, *“I don’t how God could use even me, but I’m willing and I’m available to be used of God, dependent on the Spirit and committed to His Word.”*

With one mind these people would advance the gospel to the whole world – people who no doubt would’ve said, *“How in the world could God use me?”*

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<sup>i</sup> Bryan Clark. [https://s3.amazonaws.com/LBC-Sermons/2021-01-31\\_Transcript\\_DaringToBeTheChurch\\_ThePeopleJesusCalls.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/LBC-Sermons/2021-01-31_Transcript_DaringToBeTheChurch_ThePeopleJesusCalls.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Clark.

<sup>iii</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 40-41.

<sup>iv</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 5* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), 31.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>vi</sup> H. A. Ironside, *Acts: An Ironside Exposition Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1920, 2007), 21.

<sup>vii</sup> Bruce, 41.

<sup>viii</sup> Clark.