

THE "B" TEAM

(Human God – Part 5)

I love the ocean. The breeze from the water, the smell of the sea, and the taste of the salt, brings calmness over me hard to put in words. If you have experienced it, you know what I mean. I would choose the ocean over the mountains. I would choose swimming over hiking any day.

I once knew a guy who had a PhD. in something or other that told me the reason I am drawn to the sea is because I (like all life forms) came from the sea; and so my love for the ocean is a longing to return home. I have a better explanation. I love the ocean because it reminds me of the power and creativity of God. The vastness of the sea preaches to me, proclaiming that God is bigger than I am, but He still loves me and His grace is deeper than the deepest ocean canyon. My love for the ocean *is* a longing to go home, but not to some lower life form from which I came, but to my final destination, next to the Creator of the sea, in who's image I was formed.

There is a verse in the Bible I don't like. I accept it, but I don't like it. It's Revelation 21:1, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away (I like that part), *and there was no longer any sea.*" I don't like that last part. Why will there be no sea in heaven?

I love to fish. I like all things related to the water. One day I hope to learn how to sail. My dream is to spend my retirement sailing the Intercoastal Waterways, scuba diving and fishing all along the way.

I think Jesus loved the ocean. I think He would have liked scuba diving. Apparently He had an admiration for boats and fishermen. Jesus chose 12 young men to be His disciples. Six (possibly 7) of the 12 were fishermen by trade; 2 were civil servants; 1 was a carpenter; and the occupations of 3 are unknown.¹ But half of His first followers were fishermen!

Fishing in first century Palestine was hard work, and not very profitable, unless you could afford to purchase the “fishing rights” sold by the Herods. Those who owned the fishing rights would sublet the rights to actual fishermen, who did all the work and paid a hefty tax to the investors. Little love was lost between the fishermen and these investors, who were sometimes referred to as “tax collectors.” Matthew (also known as Levi), one of the chosen Twelve, was a tax collector. It made little sense for Jesus to choose several fishermen, and a tax collector, to be His disciples.

The Sea of Galilee² has been called “the cradle of the gospel” because of its prominence in the travels of Jesus. Jesus’ adopted hometown, Capernaum was on the northern shore. Close to Capernaum was the city of Bethsaida, meaning “house of fishing” or “fisherman’s house.” Bethsaida was the hometown of Peter, Andrew, and Philip. The city of Magdala,³ located on the western shore, was the center of the fishing industry, and home of Mary Magdalene.⁴

¹ The 6 fishermen were Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, and Nathanael. The 2 civil servants were Alphaeus and Matthew (a tax collector also known as Levi). Thomas was a carpenter; and the occupations of Simon, Jude (also known as Bar Jacob), and Judas Iscariot are unknown. Also, the occupation of Matthias, who replaced Judas, is unknown.

² Besides being called the Sea of Galilee, the Bible also refers to this large fresh water lake as the Sea of Chinnereth (Numbers 34:11; Joshua 12:3; 13:27), the Lake of Gennesaret” (Luke 5:1), and the Sea of Tiberias (John 6:1; 21:1).

³ The name “Magdala” is Hebrew, meaning “tower”, suggesting that the city was the site of a guard tower overlooking an important trade route. The Greek name for the city was *Tarichaea*, meaning “dried fish.” Here, the fish would be packed in baskets for export. Fishermen would then take the “dried fish” by mule drawn wagons to shops in Jerusalem, or to a seaport where they would be loaded on ships and taken to Rome. Dried fish from Galilee was considered a delicacy among the Roman elite.

⁴ “Mary Magdalene” means “Mary of Magdala.” It is quite possible that Mary Magdalene was from a wealthy, prominent, family in Magdala.

An oval, fresh water lake, resting 682 feet below sea level,⁵ the Sea of Galilee is 12 ½ miles long and 7 ½ wide at its widest; and ranges in depth from 80 feet to 200 feet. In Jesus' day, the Sea of Galilee abounded in fish, with more than 20 different species indigenous to the lake.

Fishing on the Sea of Galilee was mainly done at night, and mainly done with nets. The "dragnet" (used for fishing at night and in the day) was the oldest type of net and took as many as 32 men to operate. The dragnet, shaped like a long wall, was typically 300 feet long and 12 feet high. Weights and sinkers were attached to the bottom of the net and corked floats were attached to the top. One team of 16 men would hold on to a strong rope attached to the dragnet. The boat would then sail out with another team until the net was fully stretched and then circled around and back to shore. A second team of 16 would hold ropes. Then, both teams would drag the nets, and its contents, back to the shore. Once on shore, the fish were sorted and the operation performed again, sometimes as many as 8 times in one day or night of fishing. Fishing was hard work.

A much smaller net was the "cast net." About 20 feet in diameter, with weights of lead attached to the border, one man would throw the cast net in a circle, either from shore or from a boat. When the net hit the water, the weights would come together, trapping the fish inside. This was a popular way to fish, especially during the day, and was most likely the way some of the disciples were fishing when Jesus walked along the shore and asked them to follow Him.

At night, fishermen would venture out into deeper waters where they would use a "trammel net" which was composed of two large mesh nets with a fine inner net in between. One end of the net would be lowered down, and then the boat would make a large circle. Unable

⁵ The only body of water lower than the Sea of Galilee is the Dead Sea. The Jordan River runs through the Sea of Galilee and empties into the Dead Sea.

to escape through the three layers of netting, the trammel net would catch every kind of fish imaginable. After a night of fishing, the nets were spread out on the rocks to dry and be mended. Rarely, and only in emergencies, would the nets be mended on the boats. Yet, that is exactly what James and John were doing when Jesus called to them and they immediately left what they were doing—emergency or not—and followed him.⁶

Fishermen were known as hard workers. They were blue-collar people, who stuck together. They were also rough and rugged, both in their lifestyle and language. And even though the fishermen Jesus chose to be His followers were devout Jews—and followers of John the Baptist—they still would have been typical fishermen of the day.

Like Jesus, His disciples would have followed the traditional formal education process of Jewish boys.⁷ Beginning at age 6, and continuing until age 12, they would have gone to *bet-sefer*, where they would have memorized the Torah. All young boys completed this first phase of education. But only the most gifted would continue their education to the next level, *beth-midrash*. The boys not chosen returned home to learn the family business. And that is exactly what happened to Peter, James, John, and Andrew; and possibly some of the other disciples. They were not considered bright enough to continue any type of formal education.

The “B” Team

My daughter’s Junior High School—consisting of only two grades, 8th and 9th—was quite large. In order to give everyone an opportunity to participate in sports, the school was divided in half—West Side and East Side—and for sports, each side had an 8th grade team and a 9th grade

⁶ The story of James and John is found in John 21:7. I found some helpful information about fishing from an article written by Dr. Elizabeth McNamer, in the July, 2004 edition of “Scripture from Scratch.”

⁷ A more detailed explanation of the education process is found in chapter 4.

team. Divided even more, each grade team (with the exception of football) had an “A” team and a “B” team. For example, in volleyball (Katherine’s favorite) there was an 8th grade “A” team and an 8th grade “B” team; a 9th grade “A” team and an 9th grade “B” team. The best players were on the “A” teams. To be on the “B” team was just a notch above being “cut” from the team altogether. (Even the uniforms for the “A” team were better.) There wasn’t much glory or fanfare in being on the “B” team.

Jesus’ disciples were “B” team players. When Jesus chose His followers, He did not choose those the world thought to be the best and brightest! For the most part, He chose men that others had written off. Not a single one of them were known for their communication styles, or their scholarship, or their organizational abilities. Instead, they were known for their outbursts, mistakes, arrogance, misstatements, bad attitudes, lapses of faith, and bitter failures.⁸ But none of that mattered because in God’s eyes, there are no “B” teams.

You were created in the image of God. O sure, you’ve made mistakes, and so have I...big ones! I have let God down, and so have you...lots of times. The image of God inside us may be distorted and disfigured, but it’s still there, waiting to bust out. God doesn’t want to *change* you. He created you, and now He wants to *recreate* you into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ! God is not out to get you, He wants to *restore* you to Himself; transforming you into what you were meant to be in the first place. To use a computer analogy: *God wants to restore the factory setting in your life, getting rid of all the viruses, so you can run efficiently.*

God doesn’t see your past mistakes. He doesn’t see your past sins. He doesn’t see your past failures. He doesn’t see your past victories. He only sees what you can be, not what you

⁸ Two excellent books on the life of the apostles are John MacArthur’s book, *Twelve Ordinary Men*; and Gene Getz’s book, *The Apostles: Becoming Unified Through Diversity*. I highly recommend them both.

are, focusing on your potential, not on your present. Jesus loves you for who you are today and He sees the greatness in you that others cannot see—both now and in the future.

What Jesus Looks for in Disciples

You don't have to look any farther than the Twelve Jesus chose to see what He looks for in disciples. To prove my point I want us to look briefly at the lives of the least known disciples. If the disciples were made up of "B" team players, these four were on team "C"—Thaddaeus, Simon, James, and Matthias.

In Luke's list of disciples, Thaddaeus is identified as "Judas son of James."⁹ Matthew refers to him as "Labbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus."¹⁰ More than likely, his given name was "Judas" (a common name in that day); "Thaddaeus" and "Labbaeus" were nicknames, with the name "Thaddaeus" sticking.

Nicknames are nothing more than names people call one another based on a person's characteristics. Sometimes nicknames represent a person's strength—"Big Jim" or "Hulk Hogan." Sometimes nicknames tell us about a person's achievement or position—"Doc," "Coach," or "Rev." A nickname could describe a physical characteristic—"Red" or "Slim." Sometimes nicknames tell us about a person's character—"Honest Abe." However, at times, nicknames can be hurtful—"Klutzo," "Dumbo," or "Metal Mouth."

No matter what a nickname is, or rather it is good or bad, they often describe us better than our real names. Nicknames reveal something about who we are, or how others perceive us. Nicknames show other people our vulnerability.

⁹ Luke 6:16.

¹⁰ Matthew 10:3 (*King James Version*).

As nicknames go, “Thaddaeus” was not good. “Thaddaeus” means “breast child” and “Labbaeus” means “heart child.” Both would be similar to calling someone a “momma’s boy.” Thaddaeus must have been a gentle and meek individual, who was tenderhearted and sensitive, to receive such a nickname.¹¹

But what others saw as a weakness, Jesus saw as a tremendous strength. Jesus chose Thaddaeus when no one else would. Church tradition says Thaddaeus ministered to the north in Mesopotamia—modern day Turkey—where he healed Abgar, the king of Edessa.¹² Thaddaeus refused to renounce his faith in Jesus, and as a result he was beaten to death with a club and then beheaded.

Vulnerability doesn’t mean you wear your feelings on your sleeve or that you are a pushover. It doesn’t mean you are easily upset by other people. To be vulnerable means to be real. It means you know your strengths and weaknesses and you are comfortable with who you are and who God created you to be. It means you are transparent—what you see is what you get—and you don’t operate with hidden agendas. The best advice concerning vulnerability is Romans 12:3, “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.”

Not a whole lot is known about Simon, but one thing we do know, you never had to wonder where Simon stood, or what he thought. If he was nothing else, he was *authentic* and

¹¹ The names “Thaddaeus” and “Labbaeus” could also refer to him being the youngest among several siblings.

¹² Eusebius, a 4th century historian, wrote that the archives at Edessa (now destroyed) contained full records of Thaddaeus’ visit and the healing of Abgar.

genuine. How do I know? Because, like Thaddaeus, he too had a nickname that speaks volumes. He wasn't just "Simon." He was "Simon the Zealot."¹³

In Jesus' day there were four political parties among the Jews: (1) the Pharisees—religious fundamentalists; (2) the Sadducees—religious liberals who denied anything supernatural; (3) the Essenes—ascetic celibates who lived in the desert, devoting their lives to studying the Old Testament; and (4) the Zealots—extremists who hated the Romans and hoped to overthrow the Roman occupation. Apparently, at one time in his life, Simon was a member of the fourth political group.¹⁴

People make a big deal about the brashness and temper of Peter. But Peter was tame compared to Simon. The Zealots advanced their agenda primarily through terrorism and acts of violence. Only God had the right to rule over them, and so they believed assassinating Roman soldiers, political leaders, and anyone else who opposed them, was doing God's Work. Zealots were ready to fight, and die, for their patriotism.

Others would have seen Simon as a person to extreme, to violent, to do any good. But Jesus saw in Simon a man of fierce loyalties, amazing passions, courage, and zeal. Church tradition says he preached the gospel in Egypt, Persia, and the British Isles, giving his life for the message of Jesus by having his body mutilated.

To be authentic is the opposite of being hypocritical. To be authentic means you are a person of integrity. It means your life backs up what you believe. There is no disconnect between belief and behavior for the truly authentic person.

There is no doubt that Jesus prized *humility*, and the one disciple that shows us humility is James, son of Alphaeus. In church tradition he is known as "James the Lesser"—another, non-

¹³ Luke 6:15 and Acts 1:13.

¹⁴ Some scholars believe Judas Iscariot was part of the Zealots as well. When Jesus sent the disciples out two-by-two, it is probable that Simon and Judas paired up.

flattering nickname. He is known this way to differentiate him from the other disciple named James,¹⁵ the brother of Peter. “Lesser” does not mean inferior or “not as important.” More than likely, “Lesser” referred to his size (meaning he was small), or to his age (meaning he was young), or to the fact that he was not as well known as the other James.

Nothing is said in the New Testament about James the Lesser, only his name is mentioned. Tradition says he was a humble man of fervent prayer. One tradition says he spent so much time on his knees in prayer that his knees thickened and looked like the knees of a camel. It is believed he took the gospel to Syria and Persia where he died by being beaten with a club and then sawed in pieces.

Humility is like underwear—necessary, but indecent if shown. Humility is the opposite of arrogance, but it is not the same thing as self-abasement. A humble person no more tears himself down as he builds himself up. To be humble means to see yourself the way God sees you. You are a wonderful person, full of unique talents and abilities; but those talents and abilities come from God and will only reach their fullest potential in relationship to Him. The wisest man to ever live put it this way, “A man’s pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit (humility) gains honor” (Proverbs 29:23).

After Jesus’ Ascension, the disciples, along with 120 followers, returned to Jerusalem. While gathered with the whole group, Peter explained that someone needed to be selected to take Judas Iscariot’s place. Peter said, “Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection” (Acts 1:21-22). After a time of worship and prayer, Matthias was selected and “added to the eleven apostles” (Acts 1:26).

¹⁵ Known in church history as “James the Greater.”

Out of the Twelve, Matthias was the most quiet and obscure. All we know is he was a loyal follower of Jesus, having been with Him as long as the others. He followed Jesus, faithfully waiting his turn, never forcing himself into the spotlight, never complaining, always making himself available to serve. Tradition says he was martyred with a spear in southern Asia because he proclaimed Jesus as God.

It has been said that the best ability is availability, and that is what Matthias shows us. The only credentials he had were that he had always been willing and able to serve.

CONCLUSION

Thaddaeus—tenderhearted and sensitive. Simon the Zealot—passionate and loyal. James the Lesser—a man of fervent prayer. Matthias—quiet and obscure. From these four individuals we learn that Jesus looks for vulnerability, authenticity, humility, and availability. And here is the punch line: *All of us can be those things!* We can't all be great and famous. Not all of us can preach or teach or write or sing or be missionaries or whatever...But we can all make ourselves vulnerable, authentic, humble, and available so Jesus can use us to change our world.

The biggest lesson we learn from these four ordinary guys is that they were *individuals*. Each person was unique. Each person had strengths and weaknesses. Each man was a normal human being. But Jesus transformed them. Jesus took their strengths and weaknesses, He took their individuality, and He transformed them into *community*. By themselves they were powerless to change the world; but in community nothing in the world could stop them.

Every one of us must come to Christ as individuals, but immediately we are called to live our faith in community. God desires to take our uniqueness, our gifts, our talents, our strengths, and our weaknesses, and blend them together in community to do a great work for Him. From God's perspective there is no "B" team individual, and there are no "B" team churches. We are His first team all-stars, and His game plan is for us to be vulnerable, authentic, humble, and available.