

# Serving in the Background

## *James the Less, Thaddeus, & Simon the Zealot*

### *The No-Name Disciples*

#### Matthew 10:4

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*King of Kings! (Gospel of Matthew Series)*

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“Trying to do the Lord's work in your own strength is the most confusing, exhausting, and tedious of all work. But when you are filled with the Holy Spirit, then the ministry of Jesus just flows out of you.”

**CORRIE TEN BOOM**

 Open your Bible to **Matthew 10**. We are continuing our series in the book of Matthew entitled: “The Twelve Who Walked with Jesus.” This morning we are looking at a message entitled: “Serving in the Background.”

#### **The No-Name Disciples**

It must be borne in mind that the apostles were men who gave up everything to follow Christ. Peter spoke for them all when he said, “See, we have left all and followed You” (Luke 18:28). They had left houses, jobs, lands, family, and friends to follow Christ. Their sacrifice was heroic. With the exception of Judas Iscariot, they all became valiant and intrepid witnesses.

We don't actually see much of their heroism in the Gospel records, because the Gospel writers—two of them apostles (Matthew and John) and the other two (Mark and Luke) close friends of apostles—honestly portrayed their weaknesses as well as their strengths. The apostles are not presented to us as mythic figures, but as real people.

Interestingly, the biblical record is sparse. Primarily, all we see are Peter, John, and later the apostle Paul (who was added to their number as “one born out of due time”—1 Corinthians 15:8). The rest of them went on into obscurity.

The central message is not the great leadership of these men. We read mostly of their weaknesses. The central message is the mercy and majesty of Jesus Christ. The Gospels are the record of how Jesus trained these 12 men. If anything we are reminded that the Lord loves to use weak and common people!

The three men that we meet today are Apostle number 9, 10, and 11. We really don't know very much about them. This is really a message about three no-name disciples. But each one teaches us something about serving God. They each ask us a question born out of their life and character.

## Outline

1. Are you willing to serve in the background?
2. Are you willing to step up?
3. Are you willing to start fresh?

## JAMES THE LESSER

First we meet a man with a very common name. The ninth name in Matthew's list of the apostles (Matt. 10:4) is "James the son of Alphaeus." The *only* thing Scripture tells us about this man is his name. James was likely very gifted, but he was willing to serve in the background.

### I. Are you willing to serve in the **Background**? (Mk. 15:40).

#### James the Ninth Apostle

If James the Lesser ever wrote anything, it is lost to history. If he ever asked Jesus any questions or did anything to stand out from the group, Scripture does not record it. He never attained any degree of fame or notoriety. He was not the kind of person who stands out. He was utterly obscure. He even had a common name.

Practically all we know about the James with whom we are concerned is that he was the son of Alphaeus (Mat. 10:3). In **Mark 15:40**, we learn that James's mother was named Mary.

#### Not James, the Lord's Brother

This apostle is not James who was Jesus' half brother who apparently became a leader in the Jerusalem church. The Lord's brother James was also called an apostle and was the spokesman who delivered the ruling at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:13–21. He is also the same James who penned the New Testament epistle that bears his name. He is not the same James (James the Lesser) named in Matthew 10:3.

#### James the Lesser, Mikros

Aside from those scant details that can be gleaned about his family, this James is utterly obscure. His lack of prominence is even reflected in his nickname. In **Mark 15:40** he is referred to as "**James the Lesser**."

The Greek word for "Less" is *mikros*. It literally means "little." Its primary meaning is "small in stature," so it could refer to his physical features. Perhaps he was a short or small-framed man.

The word can also speak of someone who is **young in age**. He might have been younger than James the son of Zebedee, so that this title would distinguish him as the younger of the two.

He was likely less in influence. You compare him with "Big James" the son of Zebedee, and he was surely much more in the background. The Bible records almost nothing about him. We know the least in the Bible about James the Less.

#### His Distinguishing Mark

It may well be that all these things were true of James, so that he was a small, young, quiet person who stayed mostly in the background. That would all be consistent with the low profile he had among the Twelve. We might say his distinguishing mark was his obscurity.

Apparently he sought no recognition. He displayed no great leadership. He asked no critical questions. He demonstrated no unusual insight. Only his name remains, while his life and his labors are immersed in obscurity.

James the Lesser was willing to serve in the background. He was called the less because he was in the shadow of James son of thunder and was probably younger and smaller in stature.

### **Stable, Faithful, Reliable**

Give me stable faithful reliable James rather than flash in the pan Christians. So many start out serving and then give up. **James the Less thought less of himself but did more for God.** From the little we know of him, he was reliable, dependable, and predictable. He wasn't fancy on the outside, but he was an established man of character on the inside.

### **Example of King Saul**

I think of King Saul in the Old Testament in 1 Samuel 9. Saul was the people's king. It says in 1 Sam. 9:2 the people sought him for his external beauty. We read: "There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people." Saul was so handsome externally, yet he was so corrupt internally.

And in 1 Sam. 16, we find that Saul squandered the kingdom. And Samuel goes to seek God's king. He doesn't go to the great metropolises to do it. He goes to the little town of Bethlehem. This is where Samuel found David. **God seems to prefer the lesser over the greater.** He's not the exciting personality in town. He's going to be the one who smells like sheep! Do not despise the day of small things.

We have to be careful in the kingdom of God. **1 Samuel 16:7**, "the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

### **God Chooses the Lesser People to Do the Greater Work**

1 Cor 1:26 tells us that God always chooses the lesser to do the greater. 1 Cor. 1:26, "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

God says in Romans 9:13, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." The younger is exalted over the older. The lesser is used and the greater might not be used at all.

### **Death of James the Lesser**

Early church history is also mostly silent about this man named James. Some of the earliest legends about him confuse him with James the brother of the Lord. There is some evidence that James the Less took the gospel to Syria and Persia. Accounts of his death differ. Some say he was stoned; others say he was beaten to death; still others say he was crucified like his Lord.

### **James the Lesser's Mother**

James' mother, Mary, was obviously a devoted follower of Christ as well. She was an eyewitness to the crucifixion. She is also one of the women who came to prepare Jesus' body for burial (Mark 16:1).

### **Brothers with Matthew?**

Here's an interesting thought about James, son of Alphaeus: You may recall that according to Mark 2:14, Levi (Matthew) was the son of a man named Alphaeus as well. It could be that this James was the brother of Matthew. After all, Peter and Andrew were brothers and James and John were brothers. Why not these two? There is no effort on the part of Scripture to distinguish between the two Alphaeuses. On the other hand, Matthew and James are nowhere identified as brothers. We simply don't know whether they were or not.

### **Twenty Dollar Violins**

The Lord uses all kinds of unqualified people, doesn't He? He can use you and me.

I think of the story of a **concert violinist** who wanted to demonstrate, a very important truth, so he hired a great hall in a city and announced that he would play a concert on a twenty thousand dollar violin. He had the place packed with violin lovers, came out and he played exquisitely and they applauded just gloriously. He bowed and took their applause, threw the violin to the ground and stomped it into bits. The people were horrified. And then he walked off the stage. The stage manager came out and said: "Ladies and Gentlemen, to put you at ease that was a twenty dollar violin, he will now return to play the twenty thousand dollar violin. And you know what? The audience couldn't tell the difference, and he made his point. It isn't the instrument; it's the artist, right?"

Now folks let's face it, most of us are twenty dollar violins, at best, right? But oh what music can the Master make with us! The Apostle said, "Who is Paul, and who is Apollos? The servant is nothing! Some plant. Some water. But it is God who gives the increase!" (1 Cor. 3:7, paraphrase).

**Transition:** Are you willing to serve in the background?

### **JUDAS THADDAEUS LEBBAEUS**

Now we come to the tenth apostle in our list. He actually had three names. (Jerome referred to him as "Trinomious"—the man with three names.) In Matthew 10:3, he is called "Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus." *Judas* was probably the name given him at birth. *Lebbaeus* and *Thaddaeus* were essentially nicknames. He is, as we will learn a man who could have done nothing, but instead answered the call. So we need to ask ourselves the question:

## **II. Are you willing to Step up? (Jn. 14:21-23).**

### **Judas (Not Iscariot)**

When the apostle John mentions him, he calls him "Judas (not Iscariot)" (John 14:22). "Judas, the son of James." The name *Judas* in and of itself is a fine name. It means "Jehovah leads." But because of the treachery of Judas Iscariot, the name *Judas* will forever bear a negative connotation.

### **Judas: Jehovah Leads**

In **Luke 6:16** he is called “Judas the son of James.” The name *Judas* in and of itself is a fine name. It means “Jehovah leads.” But because of the treachery of Judas Iscariot, the name *Judas* will forever bear a negative connotation.

Yet at this time, the name Judas was connected to **Judas Maccabaeus**, the great Hebrew general of the Intertestamental period who taught Israel guerrilla warfare. It was a very masculine name.

### **Lebbaeus, Mama’s Baby**

He was the one who was probably the youngest in his family because Lebbaeus, which means “breast child” or “youngest child.” We might say he was the “mama’s boy.”

I think about my nephew Ryan. He’s the youngest in his family. When his mom introduces him, she refers to him as “my baby.” Ryan is 19 years old and 6 foot 6 inches tall. He’s anything but little. But he’s a lebbaeus. He’s mama’s baby.

### **Thaddaeus, Brave Child**

Thaddeus means “heart child,” probably referring to his bravery. We might call him “Braveheart.” He was a tender-hearted, compassionate, gentle, sweet-spirited soul.

Sometimes that kind of a spirit can make one disillusioned. It’s easy to get disillusioned in life. But he had as we like to say: “thick skin and a big heart.”

### **It’s a Battle Out There**

It’s a battle out there. Ministry can be difficult. Paul says in Eph. 6:12, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.” He says in the previous verse (11): “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”

### **Don’t Get Bitter**

People are not our enemy. The devil is our enemy. Don’t take anything personally. Be like Thaddeus – be a braveheart. Stay humble and tender. Don’t get bitter in ministry.

Are you willing to step up like this man. Are you willing to take on the commitment like this man?

### **The Secret to His Tender Heart**

The New Testament records one incident involving this Judas Lebbaeus Thaddaeus that lets us in on the secret of his tender heart. He was always seeking to know his Savior better.

To see this, we return to the apostle John’s description of Jesus’ Upper-Room Discourse. In **John 14:21**, Jesus says, “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.”

Then John adds, “Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, ‘Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and not to the world?’” (v. 22). Here we see the tender-hearted humility of this man.

He doesn't say anything brash or bold or overconfident. He doesn't rebuke the Lord like Peter once did. His question is full of gentleness and meekness and devoid of any sort of pride. He couldn't understand how Jesus would manifest Himself to this rag-tag group of eleven, and not to the whole world.

After all, Jesus was the Savior of the world. He was the rightful heir of the earth—King of kings and Lord of lords. They had always assumed that He came to set up a physical kingdom and subdue all things to Himself.

### **Setting Up the Kingdom, One Heart at a Time**

"How can you do that Lord, and the whole world not see it?" Good question! Jesus' answer reveals the tender relationship he had with James the Lesser: John 14:23, "Jesus answered him, 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.'" In essence Jesus was saying: My kingdom is a spiritual kingdom."

The disciples were asking about the here and now, and the Lord was answering in eternities. Jesus' answer meant, "I'm not going to take over the world **externally**; I'm going to take over hearts, one at a time. If anyone loves Me, he will keep My Word. And if he keeps My Word, My Father and I will come to him and together **we'll set up the kingdom in his heart.**"

### **A Man of Healing**

Judas Thaddeus was not afraid to step up, even though his ministry was in the background. One of the earliest traditions regarding Judas Thaddaeus suggests that a few years after Pentecost, he took the gospel north, to Edessa, a royal city in Mesopotamia, in the region of Turkey today.

There are numerous ancient accounts of how he healed the king of Edessa, a man named Abgar. In the fourth century, Eusebius the historian said the archives at Edessa (now destroyed) contained full records of Thaddaeus's visit and the healing of Abgar.<sup>1</sup>

### **Step Up, Even if You are Not Seen**

We are called to serve Christ, to step up. But that does not mean we should seek the spotlight. We read about people in the Bible who step up for the spotlight. One such man is found in 3 John 1:9, "I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority." Diotrephes loved the pre-eminence. The way you can know a true follower of Christ is that they are willing to step up and give Christ all the glory!

### **Worshippers First: Tozer**

We can't serve just to serve. We have to be a Judas Thaddaeus – one who really worships God from the heart. A W Tozer said, "*We're here to be worshippers first and workers only second. We take a convert and immediately make a worker out of him. God never meant it to be so. God meant that a convert should learn to be a worshiper, and after that he can learn to be a worker...The work done by a worshiper will have eternity in it.*"

Corrie Ten Boom said: "*Trying to do the Lord's work in your own strength is the most confusing, exhausting, and tedious of all work. But when you are filled with the Holy Spirit, then the ministry of Jesus just flows out of you.*"

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<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.13.5.

### **Judas Thaddaeus's Symbol: A Club**

The traditional apostolic symbol of Judas Lebbaeus Thaddaeus is a club, because tradition says he was clubbed to death for his faith.

Thus this tender-hearted soul followed his Lord faithfully to the end. His testimony was as powerful and as far-reaching as that of the better-known and more outspoken disciples. He, like them, is proof of how God uses perfectly ordinary people in remarkable ways.

**Transition:** Are you willing to serve in the background? Are you willing to step up?

### **SIMON THE ZEALOT**

Finally we come to the eleventh apostle, and he was one who was willing to start fresh.

## **III. Are you willing to Start Fresh? (Mat. 10:4).**

### **The Zealots of Israel**

Simon needed a fresh start. He was likely part of a political organization that wanted to overthrow the Roman government. They were called the Zealots. Can you imagine that Matthew (who had worked for the Roman government) might have had just a *little anxiety*?

Simon was apparently at one time a member of the political party known as the Zealots. The fact that he bore the title all his life may also suggest that he had a fiery, zealous temperament. But that term in Jesus' day signified a well-known and widely feared outlaw political sect, and Simon had apparently been a member of that sect. He hob knobbed with terrorists! Can God save and use a person like that?

### **Philo and Josephus' Accounts**

Philo and Josephus are early historians that give us insight into the Zealots. They tell us that the Zealots hated the Romans, and their goal was to overthrow the Roman occupation. They advanced their agenda primarily through terrorism and surreptitious acts of violence.

The Zealots were hoping for a Messiah who would lead them in overthrowing the Romans and restore the kingdom to Israel with its Solomonic glory. They were red-hot patriots, ready to die in an instant for what they believed in.

The Zealots were convinced that paying tribute to a pagan king was an act of treason against God. That view found widespread acceptance among people who were already overburdened by Roman taxation.

Ultimately it was this political party that provoked Rome so much that they decided in to sack Jerusalem under Titus Vespasian in 70AD to destroy the Jewish Temple.

Josephus suggests that the name *Zealots* was a misnomer, "as if they were zealous in good undertakings, and were not rather zealous in the worst actions, and extravagant in them beyond the example of others."<sup>2</sup>

### **The Gospel Brings Us Together**

Of course, as one of the Twelve, Simon also had to associate with Matthew, who was at the opposite end of the political spectrum, collecting taxes for the Roman government. At one

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<sup>2</sup> Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 4.3.9.

point in his life, Simon would probably have gladly killed Matthew. In the end, they became spiritual brethren, working side by side for the same cause—the spread of the gospel—and worshipping the same Lord.

The Gospel brings those together who would have nothing in common otherwise. Ephesians 2:14-16 tells us that God makes former enemies friends. “He himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility”<sup>15</sup> ...that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,<sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.”

Simon the Zealot was at one time a racist. He was at one time willing to kill for his political agenda. It is amazing that Jesus would select a man like Simon to be an apostle. But he was a man of fierce loyalties, amazing passion, courage, and zeal. The fiery enthusiasm he once had for Israel was now expressed in his devotion to Christ.

### **Simon’s Death**

Several early sources say that after the destruction of Jerusalem, Simon took the gospel north and preached in the British Isles. There is no reliable record of what happened to him, but all accounts say he was killed for preaching the gospel. This man who was once willing to kill and be killed for a political agenda within the confines of Judea found a more fruitful cause for which to give his life—in the proclamation of salvation for sinners out of “every nation, tongue, and tribe.”

### **Didn’t use Past as an Excuse**

Are you hung up on your past? Christ can make you new! We don’t know much about Simon, but we do know he who was once so zealous was willing to serve the Lord in the background.

So many use their past as an excuse. Christ came to “destroy the works of the devil.” One of them is the lie that God can’t use you because of your past.

### **The Greatest Vessels Had a Past**

David was a murderer and adulterer. Moses was a vigilant and fugitive. Even among the apostles you had Paul, a murderer, and Matthew a thug.

Maybe your past is riddled with messed up relationships, bad decisions, problems with the law. What shall we say to these things?

Paul asks the question in **1 Cor. 6:9-12**, “do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,<sup>10</sup> nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

**Ephesians 5:8**, “At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.” Don’t allow the devil to let your past shackle you. You are truly unshackled. If the Son makes you free, you are free indeed!



## Conclusion

How about you? Are you willing to serve in the background, to step up and to start fresh? You may feel completely unworthy. You may feel like you are LESS of everything. Someone is always more articulate to teach, more organized to serve. But the truth is, God only uses ordinary people. The apostles are not these “stain-glassed saints” who have no flaws.

God is not looking for a few good men. There are no good men. Uncle Sam wants the best and brightest. Jesus Christ wants the broken.

John Piper said this: “*The difference between Uncle Sam and Jesus Christ is that Uncle Sam won’t enlist you in his service unless you are healthy, and Jesus won’t enlist you unless you are sick and lost* (Mk. 2:17). He didn’t come to heal those who were whole. He comes to seek and save the lost.

We don’t rely on our own gifts and abilities. We rely on God. Oswald Chamber said, “*When...people learn to rely not on their own power and wisdom, but to depend on God, there is no limit to their usefulness in God’s service.*”<sup>3</sup> When we serve God in the background we can give Jesus Christ all the preeminence! Amen!

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<sup>3</sup> Spiritual Leadership, Moody Publishers, 1967, p. 145.