

## The Rookies

Spring Training Series # 2

Luke 6: 12-16

03-08-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

### Introduction

**Spring Training** for baseball is in full swing. The *Atlanta Braves* are playing their second week of exhibition games in Florida. Returning veterans like Tom Glavine, Chipper Jones, Brian McCann, and Jeff Francoeur are preparing for the new season.

This year the pro players are joined by Jason Heyward, Freddie Freeman, and Tommy Hanson. Unless you are a true baseball fanatic, you will not recognize the names of these rookies. They are non-roster invitees who hope to earn a place on the team. Heyward is an outfielder who played for the *Rome Braves* last year. Freeman is a 6' 5" first baseman projected to join the *Myrtle Beach Pelicans* this season. Hanson is a right-handed pitcher with a 92 mph fastball, 12-to-6 curveball, and slider.

A Major League club carries 25 men on the active roster. These are the only players who can take the field at any given game. An expanded, 40-man roster includes players on the 15-day disabled list and contract players presently in the minor leagues.

Every player at Spring Training hopes to earn a place on the team's active roster. Heyward, Freeman, and Hanson dream of getting a ticket to "The Show." Only time will tell who will make the team and who will be cut.

### I. The Twelve Apostles

During his public ministry, Jesus attracted large crowds that came to witness his preaching, teaching, miracles, and signs. Some were simply curious. Others were intrigued. Many followed him from place-to-place.

One day Jesus went to a mountainside and spent the night in prayer. The next morning he gathered his followers around him. Then he chose twelve of them to become his inner band of disciples. Jesus called them "**apostles**" which means "messengers" or "representatives." The root word refers to those who are commissioned or sent.

Today's Scripture lesson provides a list of the **apostles' names**. Some are quite familiar: Simon Peter, James, John, and Andrew. Others make cameo appearances in the Gospels like Matthew, Philip, and Thomas. A few are relatively anonymous. In fact, most people would be hard pressed to name all twelve.

Frankly, the apostles were not an overly impressive group. The twelve man team was the *Bad News Bears* of disciples! To stretch the analogy, some might even question Jesus' abilities as a talent scout. Consider this.

Simon Peter, the group's leader, was an outspoken fisherman who opened his mouth to change feet. James and John responded to Jesus' message of love by asking the Lord to call down fire on a Samaritan village that rejected them. Matthew was a dishonest tax collector who had collaborated with the Roman government. Simon the Zealot was a revolutionary who sought to overthrow the Romans through armed conflict. Then there was Judas—the group's embezzling treasurer who eventually betrayed the Lord.

Why did Jesus choose these twelve men? What DID the Lord see in them? Which criteria were used to make the cut? How did these twelve make the roster? I would suggest two possible, contradictory answers: **nothing** and **something**.

## II. Nothing

Perhaps the Lord saw **nothing** to distinguish the twelve apostles from the crowds. We know from other Gospel accounts that Jesus sent 72 disciples out on preaching missions. Many others followed him. What if the twelve had nothing to distinguish them from the rest of the crowd?

A review of the Old Testament reveals that God often chose the most unexpected and unqualified people to fulfill his mission. Adam and Eve disobeyed their Creator. Noah got drunk after the flood. Abraham and Sarah doubted. Jacob lied and cheated. Joseph was a self-centered braggart. Moses attempted to evade God's mission. David committed adultery with Bathsheba. Jonah fled God's call. Job questioned why he was born. However, God worked powerfully through each of these people in order to accomplish his will.

God chose these people not because of who they were but because of who God is. The wonder is that the Lord uses human instruments to fulfill God's will. The divine call is always mysterious and grace-filled. Grace by definition is an undeserved gift freely given. We are called to be Christ's disciples not BECAUSE OF but IN SPITE OF who we are.

God's love for us is like a parent's love for a child. A newborn does nothing to "earn" the love of a mother or father. In fact, a baby does a great deal to discourage it! However, a good parent loves the child because of who the parent is.

I have coached my children in a variety of sports over the years; and they have been coached by others in turn. Although it's a bit of a stereotype, coaches tend to fall at one of two ends of a spectrum: those who want to win no matter what and those who want the kids to have a good time. For better or worse, I have typically fallen into the latter category. Good coaches probably find a way to balance the two extremes. However, it struck me that the best coaches treat youth like they were their own children. They demand excellence but make sure the boys and girls know they are valued for who they are and not what they accomplish.

Humans often live with the mistaken notion that God's love must be merited and earned. Nothing could be further from the truth. God IS love—it is the Lord's nature to love. In fact, God loves us, and nothing we do can change that fact. The only option we have is to reject God's love. Even then, our heavenly Father continues to love us.

There is a basic "given-ness" of the gospel. God chose us, we did not choose God. While we were lost, God sought us out. He calls each of us by name and invites us into a personal relationship with the Almighty. The Lord meets us where we are and then takes us where we need to be. Paul said there is no room to boast because God did it all for us.

1 Peter 1: 9-10 declares: *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you*

*are the people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”*

### **III. Something**

Perhaps the Twelve Apostles had nothing special to commend themselves for Christian discipleship. However, the opposite answer is also true. Jesus called the first disciples because he saw **something** special in their lives. Remember that the selection was not arbitrary—Christ spent the entire night in prayer before naming the Twelve. Each of them played a part in God’s divine plan—even Judas Iscariot who would later betray Jesus to the Roman officials.

When Jesus was arrested and tried, the Twelve betrayed, denied, and deserted their Lord. After the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, however, these same unremarkable men turned the world upside down so that it was right side up. The apostles formed the nucleus of the New Testament church. They spread the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth. According to tradition, eleven of the twelve died violent deaths because of their faith. We trace our spiritual genealogy back to the apostles whose names we heard today in Luke’s list.

Time and again the Holy Spirit transforms ordinary people into extraordinary saints. God see in us abilities and talents we cannot see ourselves. Think about some of the Old Testament characters I mentioned earlier. Noah saved humanity. Abraham and Sarah gave birth to the nation of Israel. Moses led God’s people to the Promised Land. King David’s heirs gave birth to Jesus of Nazareth.

The best coaches have a vision of what no one else can see. They see the **potential** in their players. Then they work to turn that potential into reality.

I witnessed an example of this last spring. **Junior League baseball** is for 13 and 14 year olds. By this age, the teenagers are fairly accomplished players, getting some serious velocity on the baseball. During tryouts, it was obvious that one young man on the field had never played the game before. Several of the dads had serious concerns about his safety. After the draft, he was placed on our team.

Although **Max** had never played organized baseball before, he had a strong work ethic and a great attitude. He became a team project. Players and adults alike helped instruct him in the nuances of the game. He improved tremendously over the weeks. When Max got his first hit, the dugout and stands went crazy. At the end of the season, he was our team’s nominee for “*the Sam Smith Award*” that recognizes good sportsmanship and hard work on the field.

God’s grace calls us just as we are. Then the Lord works to transform us into the people our Creator made us to be. In Christ, we are new creations where the old has passed away. It occurs both in an instant of conversion and over a lifetime of discipleship. The Holy Spirit is like a baseball scout that sees in us what no one else can see. Then God develops those gifts in our lives.

Oftentimes, we are surprised at what we can do. Sometimes God calls the equipped and other times God equips the called. If Christ calls us to some ministry or

mission, then we will be given the resources to succeed. Our part is to step out on faith and depend upon God.

#### **IV. Rookie Mistakes**

Along the way, we will make more than our share of errors. In fact, Major League Baseball has a phrase for this: **rookie mistakes!** First year players are expected to do some incredibly stupid things—and they never fail to deliver! But here’s an open secret—veterans make rookie mistakes, too.

I like to watch *Baseball Tonight* on ESPN. I have two favorite segments. One features “web gems” that highlight amazing plays. The other segment features “baseball’s bloopers!” Here are professional athletes who have played baseball since they were 5 years old and are getting paid megabucks to perform, and they still make the same errors a Little League team might make. Players of all ages and experience can still make incredible errors.

When my daughter first played softball, she developed a bad habit as a batter. She would lift her back foot at the end of a swing and pirouette on her front foot like a ballerina. It might have been good choreography on a dance floor but it was bad form in the batter’s box. No amount of instruction could overcome her muscle memory. So I finally took her in the yard and used some rope to tie her back foot to the fence! Then I tossed balls for her to hit. She eventually overcame the habit. Of course, how SHE tells the story is that her dad tied her to a fence and then threw softballs at her!

We’ve all got these old, worldly habits that we spend a lifetime attempting to overcome. Christians are not perfect, just forgiven. The church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners. In our Christian walk, we will often stumble and fall. We then have a choice. We can stay down and wallow in sin and guilt. Or we can accept God’s hand to get back up. The power of forgiveness is the opportunity to try again and again and again. When we fall forward, then we at least have gained another five or six feet.

**Ty Cobb** was one of the greatest baseball players of all time. *The Georgia Peach* came from Royston, Georgia and spent most of his career with the Detroit Tigers. He set 90 MLB records during his career. He is also credited with MLB’s **highest career batting average of .366.** (Or .367 or .368 depending upon the source)

For those unfamiliar with how batting averages are computed, a .366 average means that Cobb got an average of 366 hits out of 1,000 times at bat. Think about that for a moment. The man with the highest career batting average in MLB history was successful a little over one-third of the time. He failed about 63% of the time.

This is part of what I love about baseball. It’s the only sport in which a person can fail two out of three times and still be a star. If a player gets 1 hit out of 3 at-bats in Major League baseball, he is a multimillion dollar superstar! Is this a great game or what!?!

Simon Peter denied Jesus three times but went on to become the leader of the New Testament church. The disciples deserted their Lord at the moment of his greatest need. After the Resurrection, they evangelized the entire known world in one generation.

The apostle Paul persecuted the church, but he became the primary Christian missionary to the non-Jewish world. Here's an idea to rattle around in your mind. What could God have done with Judas if the apostle who betrayed Jesus had not committed suicide?!?

1 John 2: 1: *“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”*

### **Conclusion**

During our weekly planning meeting, the worship team got to playing a “what if” game. We asked the question, “What if Jesus called others to be his apostles but these were the twelve who accepted?” I don't think it's too fanciful of a question. The Gospels record instances in which Jesus called people to follow him but they declined; and other moments when people offered to follow Jesus but only on their terms. Maybe Jesus saw nothing in the Twelve. Maybe he saw something. Regardless, they only became his apostles by accepting the Lord's invitation to follow him.

The Holy Spirit still calls us today: *“Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”* We also recall Christ's words from last week's Scripture passage, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.”*

The original apostles were ordinary men; however, God empowered them to accomplish extraordinary things. Hear Christ speak to veterans and rookies alike, *“Come, follow me.”*