

THE DIRTY DOZEN
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Romans 5:1-8

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Matthew 9:35-10:8

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment."

How many of you remember “The Dirty Dozen”—the old World War II movie with Lee Marvin? It’s set in France during the German occupation in the run-up to D-Day. The Americans have come up with a plan to send a small team of soldiers behind enemy lines to take out a heavily fortified Nazi stronghold.

It’s a dangerous mission, and the Colonel in charge knows he’s going to need someone special to lead it—someone who doesn’t care about rules and regulations, someone who’s willing to do whatever it takes to complete the mission. So, he goes out and recruits Major Reisman, played by Lee Marvin. As an officer, Reisman has a reputation for being unconventional, but he also has a reputation for getting things done.

When he hears the plan, he knows it’s probably going to be a one-way ticket, but he takes the assignment anyway on the condition that he gets to pick his own men. The colonel agrees, and Reisman starts putting together a team. But instead of choosing the kind of soldiers you’d expect—soldiers with perfect records—he goes to a military prison and recruits a bunch of thieves and murderers. Which seems like a really bad idea at first, but slowly Reisman takes this unpromising band of outsiders and misfits and molds them into a cohesive unit. And the wisdom of that strategy becomes clear later on in the movie when the “dirty dozen” use their criminal skills to overcome obstacles and achieve their objective.

Now, if that story has a familiar ring to it, like maybe you’ve heard it somewhere before, that’s because it pretty closely parallels the gospel story, which is basically about an unconventional leader, who’s given a dangerous mission and puts together a team of twelve individuals, who are not the kind of disciples anyone would expect.

When Jesus recruits them, he does the same thing Major Reisman does. He looks beyond who they are and sees who they could be. He looks beyond their unremarkable backgrounds, their lack of experience, their weaknesses and character flaws, and he sees their potential to follow a greater vision.

They come from Galilee, way up in the north, far from anywhere important—kind of a backwater. A few of them are fishermen. One of them is a zealot—a violent extremist. Another one is a tax collector—someone who sold out his own people and went to work for the Romans. And yet Jesus calls them to go and proclaim the kingdom of heaven by enacting God’s mercy and love, as we hear in the reading today, where he sends them out to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons—which is every bit as dangerous as crossing enemy lines and taking out a Nazi stronghold. And if you don’t think so, just look at what comes right after today’s reading.

The conversation we hear continues, and starting in chapter ten, verse sixteen, Jesus warns the disciples that he’s sending them out “like sheep into the midst of wolves.” They’re going to run into all kinds of resistance, he tells them, and they’re going to go through all kinds of trials and tribulations. They’re going to be handed over to councils. They’re going to be flogged in synagogues. They’re going to be dragged before governors and kings. All of which might make you wonder if Jesus knows what he’s doing.

I mean, if they’re going to meet that much opposition from the powers-that-be, shouldn’t he look for people who can hold their own? Shouldn’t he look for people who have the means and the strength to push back? People in high places? People with resources? People with connections? Wouldn’t people like that make better disciples than a bunch of nobodies?

In some ways, I guess. But the wisdom of Jesus’ strategy becomes clear as the disciples start going out and doing ministry on their own. Because just like Major Reisman understands that it takes someone who knows how to pick a lock to break into a stronghold, Jesus understands that it takes someone who knows what it is to be invisible to see people who are invisible; and it takes someone who knows what it is to be broken to accept people who are

broken; and it takes someone who knows what it is to hurt to heal people who are hurting.

His view is that the needs of the world can only be met by people who know what it is to be needy themselves—people who've taken the wrong path and know what regret feels like; people who've suffered losses and know what grief feels like; people who've been stuck in life and know what desperation feels like; people who've given up on dreams and know what disappointment feels like; people who've let others down and know what shame feels like; people who've been lost and know what loneliness feels like. And that's really important for us to hear because we've all been needy in some way, at some point, and it's easy to feel like that somehow makes us unfit for ministry. It's easy to feel like Jesus would not want us to be his disciples because our lives are too messy, we've made too many mistakes, and we've got too much baggage.

But just the opposite is true. Jesus doesn't see our baggage as a disqualifier. He sees it as a prerequisite. He doesn't need people in high places. He doesn't care about resources and connections. He wants people with empathy and compassion. He wants people who can connect on a human level because they're human themselves. He wants people who know first-hand what it is to struggle, and what it is to lose.

It's still hard, though, even when we hear that to actually believe it. It's hard to believe we're suited for this. It's hard to believe we're cut out for kingdom work, as people call it—loving our neighbors, doing justice, and transforming the world. That seems like a lot, and it can feel pretty overwhelming.

So how do we find the nerve to take on the responsibility of discipleship and think for one moment that we're strong enough, and capable enough, and faithful enough to shoulder it? The only way I know is to trust in the one who called us—to trust that he actually does know what he's doing far more than we do, and if we weren't capable of accomplishing more than we can imagine we wouldn't be here today.

It's kind of like when I went to graduate school. The university I went to gave me a teaching assistantship, which was great because I didn't have to take out loans and go into debt. But the problem was, I'd never taught a day in my life, and the thought of it terrified me. So, when I got to campus that August, before classes started, I had a meeting with my advisor, and I told her I wasn't sure I could do this. She looked across her desk at me, and without missing a beat she said, "Don't worry about it. We chose you, and we know what we're doing."

That was all I needed to hear. I was still nervous, but those words gave me the confidence to walk into class every day, stand in front of my students, and know I belonged there.

So, whenever you have doubts or worries, whenever you feel overwhelmed, remember that Jesus chose you, and he knows what he's doing. He knows you can do whatever he calls you to do because just like Major Reisman saw something in his men that no one else did, something they didn't even see themselves, Jesus sees something in you. He sees your heart, and he knows you belong here. Amen.