

THE SECRET OF SERVICE

"And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach." Mark 3:14.

In all ages God has honored mountains and turned them to the highest uses. The Lord Jesus did the same thing. At the outset of His public ministry He converted a mountain into a pulpit for His first recorded sermon; after that into a sanctuary, where He communed alone with God; and in our scripture lesson we see Him making a throne of it, from which He chose those who were to be the most closely associated with Him in His kingdom.

For Him it was a remarkable day. The multitudes were about Him. So great was their eagerness to touch Him that they threatened to trample Him down. He sent His disciples for a little ship, and, crossing over, took them into a mountain. There He chose twelve. It was not a haphazard choice. Nor did He choose these men because He loved them more than the rest.

The great figures of history, whether sacred or secular, are apt to seem to us to be shadowy and unreal. We tend to forget that they were creatures of flesh and blood, with human hopes and fears, defects and qualities, like ourselves. So it is good for us to try to see these men as they actually were.

No company of men has influenced the world so tremendously as these Twelve, and no twelve could have looked less like doing so. But Jesus Himself is the determining factor. For the most part Christ has worked with unpromising material, but with it He has produced some marvelous results. How much these Twelve has to learn, about Jesus, about themselves, about one another, and about the world and its need! No one except Christ could have gotten so much out of them.

His choice was one in which He assumed all responsibility for what He did. "He called unto Him twelve, whom He Himself would." When He called them, it was not because they had asked to be called; and when He called them, there was no room for protests of inability. He assumed responsibility. If there were defects in them, and there were, He had to deal with them and remedy them. They were His choice and He chose them in the interest of His work. He chose them because they already had powers which He needed; also, because they were capable of appropriating the power He supplied. When He chose those men they were utterly inadequate to do the work, but He was able to empower them to do it. He chose them because there were capacities in them which He could sanctify and employ. That is a principle never to be forgotten. He chose them because they were the best suited to the doing of His work.

Did it ever occur to you to ask why Christ chose fishermen to be His Apostles? Nothing in His ministry is more surprising than the selection He actually made. Why did Christ choose fishermen instead of shepherds? First, because the shepherd dwelt apart while the fisherman was at home in the world of men. The shepherd's was essentially a life of solitude, the fisherman's one of fellowship. This was what Christ needed — men who knew their fellows — who had mingled with them, and were mingling with them, in all the rough and tumble of life, listening to their chatter, aware of their hopes and aspirations, and familiar with their psychology. Secondly, the shepherd was essentially an individualist, while the fisherman was one who was accustomed to cooperate with others. The shepherd worked on his own initiative, developing self-reliance and self-dependence to the full, while the fisherman never went to sea except in company. Jesus wanted men who would work together as a team rather than be brilliant individualists, and so He chose fisherman to be His apostles. Christ wants plain, ordinary people, people who are willing to let Him use them, and willing to pull together in the cause for which He stands.

I. The Chosen.

In the apostolic circle there was an abundant variety of gift and temperament. What a mixed company they were! Peter, bold, impetuous, head-strong; John, the mystic, contemplative, penetrating to the very heart of divine truth and love; Nathaniel of the ready, open, hospitable mind; Thomas critical, analytic, "I will not believe unless"; Matthew, the civil servant, gathering taxes for an alien Power. Certainly these men were not turned out according to set pattern. They came to Jesus in the freshness and vigor of their young manhood, each with his own God-given talent, each different from all the others, each dedicating his talent to the work of the Kingdom of God. Their glory consisted in the fact that Christ had called them and they had followed Him.

II. The Commission.

1. To be with Him.

He appointed them that they should be with Him. There is something inexpressibly touching in that little sentence. Our Lord wanted friends. The beginning of His ministry had been solitary. He had gone forth alone to His work. But now in this case He was in need of sympathetic fellowship. So He called these men to Him in order that He might have the heartening of His companionship, and that He might get from them what only men can give to men -- sympathy, which is the outflow of responsive love, and the expression of real devotion. He desired to have them as companions, that they might be His friends. We know how the presence of a friend helps and cheers us in our hours of trial. Our Lord was like that too. With opposition and rejection and the bitter cross to face, He hungered for sympathy and longed for friends, so He called these twelve men, that they might be with Him. By their loyalty and affection they made things easier for Him. They were to be Christ's companions, partly to help Him by their sympathy and love, but partly also that they might learn of Him. They were to be His pupils.

Christ seeks to bring us to the place where we are really "with Him" in aim, in His estimates of value, in His outlook upon the world, in all that He stands for, and in all that He expresses.

At this point there is an implication of the miraculous, for by nature we are very far from being with Christ, because we are self-centered, narrow, restricted in our thoughts, in our outlooks, in our sentiments, in our sympathies, and are seeking our own good always. But to be "with Him" surely implies a miracle of elimination, for there is much that must be taken from our lives if we are with Him. And not only a miracle of elimination, but of incorporation also, for there is much which must come into our lives if we are to be "with Him." And not only of elimination and incorporation but a miracle of subjugation also must be wrought in us, for there is much of anarchy in our inner beings; and if He is to be preeminent this miracle must be wrought.

2. To go forth for Him.

The time of fellowship was meant to issue in service. Privilege always leads up to duty. The twelve were made disciples that they might become apostles. They were blessed in order that they might become a blessing. Duty follows privilege still. Experience ought always to end in expression.

"And that He might send them forth," as the Father had sent Him. Think of all that is involved there, of service, of suffering, and of sacrifice. They were to go forth to preserve the attitudes of humility and lowliness in the world, to be among men as those whose delight it is to minister to their needs, not counting their lives dear unto them, so long as the service is accomplished and the Saviour is glorified.

But perhaps the chiefest significance of this message to us is in the choice of these men whom Christ associated with Himself in fellowship and in service. Think who they were. There is not one of them who would commend himself to the world as a first choice. Hitherto they were men of small lives, men whose capacity for greatness has preciously never been recognized. Some of them had glaring disqualifications in untamed passion and unsubdued ambition, and one of them at least had a past which was not altogether without discredit. Yet these are the men Christ calls.

What is the significance of it all to us? It does not mean for a moment that Christ has any issue with culture, with great capacity, with great intellect, or with wealth if it is properly gotten. Christ took these men because they were the best men who were available. And He still seeks today, not those already great, but those whom He may make great. To us the fact that Christ chose these men is a wonderful encouragement. Perhaps we have unfavorably contrasted ourselves and our capacities and resources with those of others. Perchance we have not had the advantages of much early training or accumulated experience. Let us take heart as we realize that Christ is not seeking conventional but elemental men: those who have the elemental capacities of faith and love and devotion; men and women who are willing to be with Him, so that having trained and disciplined them He may send them forth for Him.

Of course we cannot forget that these men, although they came to Christ, and were heart and soul with Christ, were not always successes. There was not always that holy unity among them which Christ purposed should be manifested, nor that consistent character and conduct of which He afforded them such example. But we see them as a band of men who tried and struggled and prayed and worked; who confessed their sin when they failed, and learned the secret of endurance in drawing closer to their Lord on every conscious need of forgiveness and pardon.

Now there is a wonderful consecration of diversity here. How diverse these men were with regard to their gifts, and Christ took and multiplied what each man had. He did not make them men of one type. Their individuality was never interfered with. And let us not forget that it is so always when men are "with Him." He just takes these things that men bring to Him, and by His own multiplying touch He multiplies them and increases their value, and then distributes them, just as of old He broke the bread to the crowd. How wonderful, and none other but Christ could do it.

Nor were these twelve men always conspicuous for high gifts when they went forth "to preach and to have power." James and John, for instance, were enriched with conspicuous gifts, and were raised to conspicuous positions, but of some of the twelve we hardly hear again. Their service was a hidden work, an unapplauded and unpraised work, and possibly the greater on that account. They just went on living holy, righteous, Christ-serving lives in obscurity, and carrying out the plan of God where they were placed. And thus each was complementary of the other. I like to think that this is so in the service to which Christ calls us. God does not make us all soloists. But He does train us all to sing in chorus, and teaches us to sing in harmony; and the music of the harmony is that which attracts the world to Him.

It is interesting to note that those of the twelve who were closest in their intimacy with Christ, and that by their own desire, were subsequently most prominent in the service of the Kingdom. It was no arbitrary favoritism which permitted Peter, James, and John to be with Christ in those holy crises of His life. They were always repeatedly asking that they might be nearest to Him, to sit on His right hand and on His left. I like to think of them as they longed for the closest possible intimacy with their Lord. Those closest to Him in intimacy were certainly most conspicuous for Him in subsequent service, and I think we may learn from this fact that it is intimacy with Christ which confers power. It is intimacy with Him, knowledge of His desires, and knowledge of His ways which qualifies us to go forth, and confers upon us power for His service.

Jesus called them unto Him, and there is the further glad record that "they came unto Him." What a wonderful response to an invitation which they but imperfectly understood, and the implications of which they had not discerned, for who indeed can discern them? It cost them something to come to Him. They had to renounce much for that friendship. They had to be content to leave much when they responded to Him, but who can measure what they gained? And in these days, if you hear Christ calling you to come closer -- it is just for this, that you may be "with Him," and that He may send you forth for Him; back to those uncongenial surroundings; back to the old place, but with a new love-light on your face; back to the old place, but with a new thrill in your heart; back to the old place, but with a tenderness of heart which transforms and transfigures everything, and makes the commonest thing radiant with the reflected light of fullest consecration. Do not refuse the call because you have to give up something in order to enter such a fellowship; do not refuse the call because of a certain something you cannot bring into the presence of Christ. Have respect unto the recompense of the reward.