Jesus’ selection of the Twelve from the group of disciples who had gradually gathered around Him is an important landmark in the gospel history. It divides the Lord’s ministry into two parts. Both parts are nearly equal in duration, but they are unequal as to the extent and the importance of the work done. In the first period, Jesus worked alone. His miraculous works were confined, for the most part, to a limited area. His teaching was elementary. But by the time the Twelve were chosen, the work of the kingdom had grown to such dimensions that it had to be organized and the labor divided among the disciples. Also, Jesus’ teaching was beginning to be deeper and more complex, and His gracious activities were spreading to many other areas.

In all probability it had become necessary for Christ to select a limited number of men to be His close and constant companions because of His success in gaining disciples. We can only imagine that the number of His followers had mushroomed to the point where it was a hindrance for Him to move from place to place. This was especially true of His long journeys which were made in the latter part of His ministry. It was impossible for all those who believed in Him to continue to follow Him, in the literal sense of the word, wherever He chose to go. The greatest number of them now could only follow Him occasionally. But it was His desire that certain men whom He selected be with Him at all times and in all places. He wanted them to be His traveling companions on all His journeys, to see His work first-hand, and to minister to Him by providing for His daily needs. And so, in the remarkable words of Mark, “And He.....summoned those whom He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. And He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him...” (Mark 3:13-14).

These Twelve, however, were going to be more than traveling companions or lowly servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. But for now, they were to be students of Christian doctrine and occasional laborers in doing the work of the kingdom. Eventually, they would be Christ’s chosen agents, fully trained to spread the faith after He had left the earth. From the time they were chosen, the Twelve became apprentices under Jesus. He was preparing them for the great office of apostleship. In this course of training, they were to learn what they should do, believe, and teach as His witnesses and ambassadors to the world. This was to take place in the privacy of an intimate and daily fellowship with their Master. From this time on, the training of these men was to be a constant and prominent part of Christ’s personal work. He was to make it His top priority to tell them in the darkness what they should later speak about in the daylight. He
would whisper in their ears what they would later preach from the housetops (Matt. 10:27).

**The Time of Jesus’ Selection**

Although we cannot be absolutely certain as to the exact time when Jesus chose the Twelve, it can be somewhat determined because of its relationship to certain leading events that happened in the gospel history. John speaks of the Twelve as an organized group when Jesus fed the five thousand and gave the message on the bread of life in the synagogue of Capernaum shortly after the miracle. From this fact we learn that the Twelve were chosen at least one year before the crucifixion. We can be certain of this because the miracle of the feeding took place, according to John, shortly before a Passover season (John 6:4). Jesus asked the men He had chosen, “Did I Myself not choose you, the Twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?” (John 6:70). He seemed to be expressing doubt about the disciples’ faithfulness after the multitude had deserted Him. So, from His question, we conclude that His choosing the Twelve was not a recent event. The Twelve had already been together long enough to give the false disciple the opportunity to show his real character.

The evangelists who wrote the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, & Luke) mark the selection of the Twelve with two other important events. By the time they commenced their mission in Galilee, Matthew indicates the Twelve were a distinct body. However, he does not say they were chosen immediately before the mission, nor does he explicitly relate the two. Rather, he refers to the apostolic fraternity as if it had already been in existence. His words were, “And having summoned His twelve disciples…” (Matt. 10:1). Luke, on the other hand, gives us a formal record of the selection. It is found in the preface to the Sermon on the Mount. He creates the impression that the choosing of the disciples preceded the Sermon (Luke 6:13,17). Finally, Mark’s narrative confirms the findings of Matthew and Luke, namely, that the Twelve were called just before the Sermon on the Mount was delivered and a good while before they were sent out on their preaching and healing mission. We read, “And He went up to the mountain and summoned those whom He Himself wanted” (Mark 3:13). Evidently, the ascent he referred to was that which Jesus made just before He preached His great message. Mark continues, “And He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out the demons” (Mark 3:14-15). He is alluding here to an intention that Jesus had to send His disciples on a mission. However, the intention is not presented as if the disciples immediately left for this mission. We cannot even say that Mark implies that the disciples immediately left to accomplish their mission. Several chapters later in his Gospel, Mark gives an account of the mission as it was actually carried out: “And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out…” (Mark 6:7).

It is almost certain, then, that the calling of the Twelve occurred before the preaching of the great sermon on the kingdom. Later, they would have a distinguished part in founding this kingdom. As to the precise time in the ministry of our Lord when the sermon was given, we cannot be
absolutely sure. Our opinion, however, is that the Sermon on the Mount was delivered toward the close of Christ’s first lengthy ministry in Galilee. This would have taken place between the two visits to Jerusalem on the festive occasions mentioned in John 2 and 5.

**The Number of Apostles**

The number of Apostles chosen is significant. It was a matter of Jesus’ choice, just as the composition of the men was. A larger number of eligible men could have been easily found from the circle of disciples which later provided no fewer than seventy assistants for evangelistic work. A smaller number might have served all the present or future purposes of the apostleship. The number twelve was recommended for obvious symbolic reasons. It expressed what Jesus claimed to be and what He had come to do. The symbol supported the faith of His followers and stimulated their devotion to Him. It hinted at the fact that Jesus was the divine Messianic King of Israel who had come to set up His kingdom. His advent was foretold by prophets in glowing language spoken during the prosperous days in Israel’s history. Then, the theocratic community had integrity, and all the tribes of the chosen nation were united under the royal house of David. So the number twelve was designed to have a mystical meaning. We know this from Christ’s own words to the Apostles which He spoke on a later occasion. He was describing to them the rewards which would be waiting for them in the kingdom for their past services and sacrifices. He said, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28).

It is possible that the Apostles were very much aware of the mystical significance of their number. It probably gave them encouragement for their fond but deluded hope that the coming kingdom would not only be a spiritual realization of the promises, but a literal restoration of Israel to political integrity and independence. Risking this misunderstanding was one of the drawbacks connected with the particular number twelve. But Jesus did not consider that a good reason for selecting another number. His method of proceeding in this matter, as in all things, was to live by that which in itself was true and right. He would then correct misunderstandings as they arose.

**The Twelve Apostles**

We now leave the discussion about the number who were Apostles and consider the men themselves. Seven of the Twelve are people whom we already know, if we assume Bartholomew and Nathaniel are the same person. They are the first seven listed in Mark’s and Luke’s lists. As we proceed in the gospel history, we will become better acquainted with two of the remaining five who are listed first and last. Thomas, who is called Didymus (the Twin), will come before us as a man who has a warm heart, but who is melancholy in his temperament. He is ready to die for his Lord but is slow to believe in His resurrection. Judas Iscariot is known to the world as the Traitor. He appears for the first time in these lists of the Apostles with the infamous title.
branded on his brow: “Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him” (Mark 3:19). The presence of a man who is capable of treachery among the elect disciples is a mystery which we will not attempt to penetrate right now. We simply make the following historical remark about Judas: he seems to have been the only one among the Twelve who was not a Galilean. His surname is apparently taken from the place where he was born: the man of Kerioth. From the book of Joshua, we learn that there was a town by that name in the southern part of the tribe of Judah (Joshua 15:25).

**James the Son of Alphaeus & Thaddaeus**

Very little is known about the last three names. There have often been attempts by biblical scholars to identify James the son of Alphaeus with James the brother or relative of the Lord. Many people have speculated that the next one mentioned in the lists of Matthew and Mark - Thaddaeus - was a brother of this James, and therefore another brother of Jesus. This opinion is based on the fact that Luke uses the name “Judas the son of James” (Luke 6:16) instead of Lebbaeus or Thaddaeus as the first two Gospels do. The word which is missing in the text (“the son”) has been supplied for us. It is assumed that the James mentioned is James the son of Alphaeus. Yet, no matter how tempting it is to hold on to this opinion, we can not be certain about it. We must be content with stating that there was a second James who was one of the Twelve in addition to the brother of John and the son of Zebedee. There was also a second Judas, who appears again in the farewell conversation that took place between Jesus and His disciples on the night before His crucifixion (John 14:22). John carefully differentiates him from the traitor by the parenthetical remark, “not Iscariot.” This Judas is the same person as Lebbaeus and Thaddaeus, and has been called the three-named disciple.

**Simon the Zealot**

The last disciple mentioned, like the first, was a Simon. This second Simon is as unknown as the first one is renowned. He is not mentioned anywhere in the gospel history, except in the lists of the Apostles. Still, as little known as he is, the descriptive phrase attached to his name - “who was called the Zealot” (Luke 6:15) - carries with it a piece of information that is odd and interesting. He is called the Kananite (not Canaanite), which is a political, not a geographical designation. This is apparent from the Greek word which has been substituted here for the Hebrew word. He calls this disciple Simon Zeelotes. In English, it is Simon the Zealot. Without a doubt, this descriptive word, Zeelotes, connects him with the famous party which rebelled with Judas in the days of the taxing (Acts 5:37) about twenty years before Christ’s ministry began. At this time, Judea and Samaria were brought directly under the government in Rome, and the census was taken for future taxation purposes. How unique a phenomenon is this ex-zealot among the disciples of Jesus! No two men could be more different in their spirits, goals, and strategies than Judas of Galilee and Jesus of Nazareth. One was certainly not content with the political situation. The other would have the people who were conquered bow to Caesar’s control and give him what was due. Judas was trying to restore the kingdom to Israel and adopted for his motto, “We have no Lord or Master but God.” Jesus was focused on founding a
kingdom which would not be national, but universal; not “of this world,” but purely spiritual. The strategies used by the two were as different as their goals. Judas resorted to using the weapons of war - the sword and the dagger. Jesus relied totally on the gentle, yet all-powerful, force of truth.

We do not know what led Simon to leave Judas for Jesus. But he made a great exchange for himself. The party he left was destined to come to ruin in later years. They would also do damage to their own country because of their fanatical, reckless, and hopeless patriotism. The insurrection of Judas was crushed. But the fire of discontent still smoldered in the hearts of his followers. In time, it burst out into the blaze of a new rebellion. This brought about a life-and-death struggle with the gigantic power of Rome and ended with the destruction of the Jewish capital and the dispersion of the Jewish people.

By choosing this disciple to be an Apostle, Jesus gave another illustration of His disregard for playing it safe. An ex-zealot was not a safe man to make into an Apostle. He might put Jesus and His followers in an awkward position. They could become objects of political suspicion. But the Author of our faith was willing to take the risk. He expected to gain many disciples from the dangerous classes of people as well as from the despised. He also wanted them to be represented among the Twelve.

It gives one great joy to think about Simon the Zealot and Matthew the publican - men coming from such diverse backgrounds - being together in close fellowship in the little band of twelve men. Extremes meet in these two disciples - the tax-gatherer and the tax-hater; the unpatriotic Jew who degraded himself by becoming a servant of a foreign ruler, and the Jewish patriot who was furious about being under the foreign ruler, and longed for emancipation. It was not accidental that these two opposites were united. Rather, it was designed by Jesus as a prophecy of future things to come. He wanted the Twelve to be a miniature church. Therefore, He chose them to suggest that distinctions between publican and zealot should not exist. In the same way, in the church of the future, there would be neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, bond nor free, but only Christ - everyone would belong to each other, and each person would be a part of the whole body.

These are the names of the Twelve as they are given in the lists. As we closely examine the rolls, we observe that they contain three groups of four. The same names are found in each list, but the order of their appearance varies. The first group includes the best known; the second, the next best; and the third, those least known of all of them. In the case of the traitor, he is known only too well. Peter is the most prominent Apostle. He stands at the head of each list, whereas Judas is at the foot. There, as we have already noticed, he is carefully designated as the traitor. If we take the order that Matthew gives us and borrow the descriptive phrases from the gospel history at large, the apostolic roll is as follows:
Why Jesus Chose These Men

These were the men whom Jesus chose to be with Him while He was on this earth and to carry on His work after He left it. These were the men whom the church celebrates as the “glorious company of the Apostles.” The praise is deserved. But the glory of the Twelve was not given by this world. From a worldly point of view, they were a very insignificant company - a group of poor, illiterate, Galilean rustics. They were totally devoid of social status and were not likely to be chosen by anyone who had the highest regard for these kinds of issues. Why did Jesus choose such men? Was He guided by feelings of antagonism toward those who possessed social advantages? What about His being partial toward men who were from His own class? No. His choice was made in true wisdom. If He mainly chose Galileans, it was not because He was prejudiced against those from the provinces in the south. If, as some think, He chose two or even four from His own relatives, it was not from nepotism. If He chose common, uneducated, humble men, it was not because He was jealous of knowledge, culture, or good birth. If any rabbi, rich man, or ruler had been willing to surrender himself, without reservation, to serve the kingdom, there would have been no objection to him because of his accomplishments, possessions, or titles. The case of Saul of Tarsus, the pupil of Gamaliel, proves the truthfulness of this point. Even Gamaliel himself would not have been rejected had he been able to stoop to become a disciple of the unlearned Nazarene. But notice this! Neither he nor any from his rabbinical order would stoop this low. Therefore, the despised One did not get an opportunity to

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**First Group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simon Peter</td>
<td>The man of rock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Peter’s brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James and John</td>
<td>Sons of Zebedee, and sons of Thunder</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Second Group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>The earnest inquirer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bartholomew, or Nathaniel</td>
<td>The guileless Israelite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>The melancholy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>The publican (so called by himself only)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Third Group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James (the son) of Alphaeus</td>
<td>(James the Less? Mark 15:40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebbaeus, Thaddaeus, Judas of James</td>
<td>The three-named disciple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>The Zealot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judas, the man of Kerioth</td>
<td>The Traitor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The Twelve
show His willingness to accept men like this as His disciples or choose them as His Apostles.

The truth is that Jesus was obligated to be content with fishermen, publicans, and former zealots for His Apostles. They were the best that could be had. Those who thought they were better than they, were too proud to become disciples. Therefore, they excluded themselves from the high honor of being chosen to be princes of the kingdom. The whole world can now see what an honor it was to be selected as one of His Apostles. The civil and religious leaders boasted about their unbelief (John 7:48). For a brief moment, the citizens of Jerusalem felt interested in this zealous Youth who had purged the temple with a whip of small cords. But their faith was superficial. Their attitude was patronizing. Therefore, Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew what was in them (John 2:23-25). There were a few people who sincerely identified with Him, but they were not committed enough to Him to be eligible to be Apostles. Nicodemus was barely able to speak a timid word to defend Christ. Joseph of Arimathea was a “secret disciple” because he feared the Jews. These were hardly the people to send out as missionaries of the cross. These were men who were bound by social ties and party connections. They were enslaved by the fear of man. The Apostles of Christianity had to be made of tougher stuff.

Jesus was obligated to fall back on the rustic, but simple, sincere, and energetic men of Galilee. And He was quite content with His choice. He devoutly thanked His Father for giving them to Him. He would not have despised learning, position, wealth, or refinement if they had been surrendered to His service. But He preferred devoted men who had none of these advantages over uncommitted men who had them all. And He did so with good reason. It did not matter very much to Him what the social position or the previous history of the Twelve had been. Those things only mattered to their contemporaries who were prejudiced anyway. Jesus was only concerned that they were spiritually qualified for the work to which they were called. What is ultimately revealed about a man is not what is on the outside, but what is within. John Bunyan was a man who was born in poverty. He had a humble occupation. And, until his conversion, he had very bad habits. But he was born a genius and, by grace, he was a man of God. He would have been a most effective apostle. In fact, he was one.

**Objection to Jesus’ Choices**

Someone might object that all of the Twelve were by no means gifted like Bunyan. Some of them, in fact, were all but useless (to be blunt about it). They were - if they are judged by the fact that no one knows much about them except their names; and, if they are measured by the silence of the history about them. They did not make a name for themselves, either by being highly gifted or by having had great careers. Since this objection virtually undermines the wisdom of Christ’s choice, it is necessary to examine it to determine whether it is true or not. We submit the following rebuttals of this view:

**Rebuttals**

1. It cannot be denied that some of the Apostles were relatively unknown and inferior men. But
even the least known among them may have been the most useful as witnesses for Him. They had been in His company from the beginning. It does not take a great man to make a good witness. And to be witnesses of the truthfulness of Christianity was the main business of the Apostles. We do not need to doubt that the most humble among them offered important service in that capacity, even though nothing is said about them in the works of the Apostles. It was not to be expected that Luke's history, which was incomplete and brief, would mention any but the principal actors. This is true especially when we reflect on how few of the characters that appear on the stage during any particular crisis in human history are prominently noticed - even in histories that go into elaborate detail. The purpose of history is served by recording the words and deeds of the key people. Many who did outstanding things in their day are often allowed to drop into obscurity. The Apostles who are the least distinguished are entitled to the benefit of this perspective.

2. Three prominent men - even two (Peter and John) - out of twelve is a good ratio. There are few organizations in which superior excellence has such a high percentage to respectable mediocrity. Perhaps the number of “pillars” (Gal. 2:9) was as great a number as He desired. We ought to be thankful for the fact that everyone was not a Peter or a John. It means that there were different gifts among the first preachers of the Gospel. As a general rule, it is not good when all are leaders. Little people are needed as well as great ones. For human nature is one-sided. Little people have their special virtues and gifts and can do some things better than their more celebrated brothers and sisters.

3. We must remember how little we know about any of the Apostles. Biographers today write for a public that is either morbidly or idly curious. They go into the most trivial detail about a particular event or personal issue concerning their heroes. There is no trace of this idolatrous triviality in the histories of the evangelists. The writers of the Gospels were not obsessed with biographic detail. In addition to this, the Apostles were not the theme of the Gospels. Christ was their hero. Their sole desire was to tell what they knew about Him. They gazed without wavering at the Sun of Righteousness, and in His radiance they lost sight of the stars that attended Him. Whether they were stars of the first magnitude, or of the second, or of the third, made little difference.