

Sending Out the Twelve (Matt. 10:1–15)

By Jacob D. Gerber

In the last section, Jesus was moved with compassion on the crowds, whom he saw as harassed and helpless sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36). Having recognized the need for more laborers to bring in the plentiful harvest (Matt. 9:37–38), Jesus now begins to call and send out the Twelve who will extend his ministry as they exercise his own authority, in his name. By this, Jesus is not merely recruiting volunteers who would be willing to help him in some weak kind of sense. Rather, *Jesus sends ministers to administer the authority of his kingdom.*

The Ministers (Matt. 10:1–4)

Significantly, Jesus calls to himself *twelve* disciples. We have so far read the narratives of Jesus' calling of five of these disciples (Matt. 4:18–22; 9:9), but here we learn of the full complement of the Twelve.¹ Regarding the number *twelve*, here is little question that we are meant to understand this as a direct reflection of the twelve patriarchs, the sons of Jacob who became the eponymous heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. There is some debate about the precise nature of the relationship, but I think Calvin captures the continuity and discontinuity of the relationship of these disciples to the tribes of Israel when he speaks of *restoration* of the Church of God: “As the nation was descended from *twelve* patriarchs, so its scattered remains are now reminded by Christ of their origin, that they may entertain a fixed hope of being restored.”²

Notably, Jesus empowers the disciples with “authority.” This word *authority* has appeared many times to characterize the words and deeds of Jesus (Matt. 7:29; 8:9; 9:6, 8), who “now delegates something of that authority to twelve men.”³ Indeed, Jesus was sending his disciples out to carry out the same mission that he had embarked upon thus far alone (Matt. 4:23; 9:35), so that the “Twelve are truly representing their Master, for they are doing what he himself is doing and what they have been ordered to do. In the same manner Jesus himself represents the Father (John 5:19).”⁴ Yet, though these disciples stewarded the authority of the Son of David, these were not prominent men: “The highest level of society represented among the Twelve was the four professional fishermen. Others included a tax collector, an insurrectionist, and a traitor.”⁵ It is not only that their origins were unimpressive, but, as Morris points out, we know very little of their eventual accomplishments: “very little is known about most of them; evidently some of them were not memorable men. If this is

¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 241–42.

² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:438.

³ Carson, “Matthew,” 276.

⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 450.

⁵ Osborne, *Matthew*, 373.

so, it would accord with the fact that God has often chosen people the world has regarded as insignificant through whom to do his wonderful works.”⁶

Still, Matthew tells us here that these twelve are not only *disciples*, but *apostles* (ἀποστόλων; *apostolōn*), from the verb ἀποστέλλω (*apostellō*), “to send out,” which appears in v. 5: “These twelve Jesus *sent out*....”⁷ As Morris observes, “This is Matthew’s one use of the word “apostle,” and the only use of the expression *the twelve apostles* in the Gospels (it occurs in Rev. 21:14).”⁸ The phrase “The names of...,” in v. 2, may also echo earlier biblical language associated with Israel: “People might have remembered Moses’ choice of twelve tribal leaders in Num 1:1–16, and it is even possible that Matthew’s phrase ‘These are the names of...’ is a deliberate echo of Num 1:4, ‘These are the names of the men who shall assist you.’”⁹ This is further confirmation that Matthew intends for us to understand that the restoration of the Twelve Tribes of old covenant Israel would take place through these Twelve Apostles who exercise Jesus’ authority.

This list of names is structured as three lists of four, which may be an important point:

In each list, there are three groups of four, each group headed by Peter, Philip (not to be confused with the evangelist), and James son of Alphaeus respectively. But within each group the order varies (even from Luke to Acts!) except that Judas is always last. This suggests, if it does not prove, that the Twelve were organizationally divided into smaller groups, each with a leader.¹⁰

The “first” name on the list is Simon, called Peter (v. 2b), which “indicates that he was in some sense the leader.”¹¹ As Carson observes, “The word cannot mean he was the first convert (Andrew or perhaps John was) and probably does not simply mean ‘first on the list,’ which would be a trifling comment (cf. 1Co 12:28). More likely it means *primus inter pares* (‘first among equals’...).”¹²

While we have already met Peter and Andrew, James and John (in the first set), we have only met one of the members of the second set of four apostles: Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, and Matthew the tax collector (v. 3a). We read about Philip’s calling story in the Gospel of John 1:43. Immediately after Jesus calls Philip, we then read that Philip invites a man named Nathanael to meet Jesus as well (John 1:44–51; see also John 21:2). For this reason, many believe that “Bartholomew” is another name for “Nathanael.”¹³ There isn’t a lot of evidence to work with here; however, it would certainly not be unusual for a disciple to go by multiple names, since Peter was originally named Simon, and since “Thaddeus” appears as “Judas the son of James” in Luke 6:16). This is also the first time we meet “Judas Iscariot,” and Matthew tells us immediately that this is the man “who betrayed him” (v. 4).

⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 242.

⁷ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 410.

⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 242–43.

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 376.

¹⁰ Carson, “Matthew,” 277.

¹¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 243.

¹² Carson, “Matthew,” 277.

¹³ e.g., “Bartholomew is clearly the Nathanael of John’s Gospel...” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 453.)

The Mission (Matt. 10:5–8)

Starting in v. 5, we begin to hear Jesus' instructions for the mission on which he was sending his disciples. On these instructions, Morris observes that, "Matthew was more interested in the instructions Jesus gave the preachers than in the actual trip, for he mentions neither that they departed, nor where they went, nor when they returned."¹⁴ Jesus' initial instruction to the Twelve sounds strange to our ears: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans" (v. 5). We must read this prohibition, however, with knowledge that Jesus will eventually send his disciples to make disciples of "all nations" (Matt. 28:18–20; see also Matt. 10:18).¹⁵ Furthermore, it is worth noting that the language is strange, and a bit difficult to translate well into English: "Into the way of the Gentiles, do not go, and into the town of the Samaritans, do not enter" (v. 5, my translation). France may be correct when he writes, "The geographical terms used here ('way of the Gentiles,' 'town of the Samaritans'; cf. 'towns of Israel,' v. 23) indicate a restriction on the area to be visited rather than a total ban on contact with Gentiles and Samaritans as such."¹⁶ Jesus, then, is not excluding the Samaritans and Gentiles, but only prioritizing "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v. 6). This command connects backward to Jesus' concern about the crowds who were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" from v. 36, but more than that, "Matthew is fond of the sheep imagery; he has the word *sheep* 11 times in all (elsewhere only John with 17 has it more than twice)."¹⁷

While v. 1 emphasized the *deeds* that the apostles would do, Jesus now charges them to *preach*: "And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (v. 7). Again, we should recognize that this message of the kingdom of heaven is the same that Jesus himself (and John the Baptist; Matt. 3:2) had been preaching since the beginning of his public ministry (Matt. 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19, 20; 7:21; 8:11). As Hendriksen writes, this message of the nearness of the *kingdom of heaven* means that, "through the fulfilment of Messianic prophecy heaven's (i.e., God's) reign in the hearts and lives of men would assert itself more powerfully than ever before, [and that it] was about to begin, in a sense had even now arrived."¹⁸ When John and Jesus preached about the nearness of the kingdom of heaven, they urged their hearers to *repent* (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). Still, Jesus intends for the apostles to do miraculous deeds (v. 8). The language of this verse is powerful by its terseness in the original Greek: "[The] sick heal, [the] dead raise, [the] lepers cleanse, [the] demoniacs cast-out [their demons]" (v. 8).¹⁹

The Method (Matt. 10:9–15)

Not only does Jesus tell his apostles *what* they should do on their mission; he also instructs them about *how* they should execute their mandate. To begin, Jesus insists that the disciples should not

¹⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 245.

¹⁵ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 170.

¹⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 381–82.

¹⁷ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 245.

¹⁸ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 457.

¹⁹ "Note the beauty and the power of the form—each clause having only two terms." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 392.)

take money, or a bag, or an extra tunic, or sandals, or even a staff with them (vv. 9–10a). Certainly this means, in part, that “the mission is for serving God, not for self-aggrandizement. The purpose is to remove all material encumbrances and incentives so as to focus entirely on God’s work....At the same time, the basic principle is twofold: do not use ministry for profit, and depend on God rather than self.”²⁰ Still, these limitations are especially severe, so that Nolland comments, “The prohibition of footwear is quite dramatic...In hard walking conditions bare feet and lack of staff would create very visible vulnerability.”²¹ Notably, the rest of the New Testament does not carry forward these specific requirements for ministers of the gospel (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:6–12; 1 Tim. 5:18).²²

Still, Jesus also says here that “the laborer deserves his food” (v. 10b). How would their needs be provided for, if they weren’t simply paid? Jesus instructs them that, in “whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart” (v. 11). The “worthiness” of their host would be determined by willingness to receive them: “It would not be a difficult matter to determine who is such a man. The two apostles would make their public proclamation in the place (v. 7: κηρύσσετε [*kērussete*]), the people would hear and see who had come into their midst, and so in most cases it would prove an easy matter to find the proper person with whom to lodge.”²³ The requirement to stay in one place until they departed likely had two purposes. First, this created a natural limitation on the time that they would stay in any one place: “they must make haste, so that, after having published the Gospel in one city, they may immediately run to another.”²⁴ Second, this kept the disciples from trying to shop around for the best situation: “The apostles are not to shift to another host who, perhaps, may offer better lodging and fare. The hospitality first offered is to be honored.”²⁵

Upon their arrival at a new host’s home, the disciples would give their greeting to the house (v. 12). Then, when they left, they would either allow the peace to remain on the house, or they would have their peace return to them (v. 13). Hendriksen is helpful on the significance of this:

When they enter any home they must pronounce their greeting upon it. Accordingly, they will use the familiar formula, “Peace to you.” At that time, as also even today, this was and is a customary greeting (Gen. 43:23; Judg. 6:23; 19:20; 1 Sam. 25:6; 1 Chron. 12:18; Ps. 122:8; Dan. 4:1; 6:25; 10:19; Luke 10:5; 24:36; John 20:19, 21, 26). Nevertheless, it makes a great difference who says it. In the mouth of the unthinking person it may be no more than a conventional phrase. Among friends it was and is undoubtedly the expression of a sincere wish. In the present instance, however—and so also in such passages as Luke 24:36; John

²⁰ Osborne, *Matthew*, 379.

²¹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 418.

²² “Some have ignorantly supposed that the rule here laid down for the ministers of the word, or for the apostles, is perpetual. We shall presently meet with a few sentences which have a more extensive reference: but the present injunctions not to carry baggage must undoubtedly be restricted to that temporary commission.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:443–44.)

²³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 394.

²⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:445.

²⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 394–95.

20:19, etc.—it is far more than a wish. In the name of their Sender these apostles not only *wish* peace, they actually *bring* it. Just as in the Aaronitic benediction (Num. 6:24–26) the name of Jehovah *was put* upon the children of Israel, so that his blessing would actually result so it is here.²⁶

The particular manner in which they would retrieve their peace from the house (in the case of a host who ultimately proved unworthy) was to shake the dust off of their feet when they left. Carson writes:

A pious Jew, on leaving Gentile territory, might remove from his feet and clothes all the dust of the pagan land now being left behind (Str-B, 1:571), thus dissociating himself from the pollution of those lands and the judgment in store for them. For the disciples to do this to Jewish homes and towns would be a symbolic way of saying that the emissaries of Messiah now view those places as pagan, polluted, and liable to judgment (cf. Ac 13:51; 18:6).²⁷

Jesus assured them that, in such cases, their foot-shaking would be no empty gesture: “Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town” (v. 15). Here, Jesus recalls one of the most terrifying judgment scenes captured in the entire Bible (see Gen. 19:23–29), and then says that the judgment will be even worse for those who do not respond in faith to his gospel.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the opening section (vv. 1–4) tell us about the Twelve? What do we learn from Jesus’ giving them his “authority” (v. 1a)? What kind of work will they do with that authority (v. 1b)? What significance is there from calling these disciples the “twelve apostles” (v. 2)? How many of these disciples have we met so far? How much do we know about the others? What does this tell us about the notoriety of this ragtag band?
2. Why do you think Jesus forbids his disciples from going on “the way of the Gentiles” or into “the town of the Samaritans” (v. 5)? Does Jesus intend this prohibition forever (see Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 1:8)? What does Jesus mean by “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 6)? What is “the kingdom of heaven” (v. 7a)? What does it mean that this kingdom is “at hand” (v. 7b)? How does the healing ministry of the disciples support their preaching (v. 8)?
3. Why did Jesus forbid the disciples from taking along with them money, clothes, etc. (v. 9–10a)? How do we make sense of this prohibition, when Jesus also tells them that “the laborer deserves his food” (v. 10b)? How does Jesus intend to feed and shelter his disciples on their journey (vv. 11)? What kind of judgment are the disciples to execute as they go (vv. 12–14)? What are the potential consequences for those who are not worthy (v. 15)?

²⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 459–60.

²⁷ Carson, “Matthew,” 286.

4. What does it mean for Jesus to administer his authority through ministers? What is a “minister”? How do ministers relate to a king in the context of a kingdom? What does this tell us about the nature of the ordained ministry of the church? How does the work of ordained preachers administer Jesus’ authority today? Still, are ministers the only members of the body of Christ in the church (see Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12)? How should the whole body work together?