

## **“I Have Chosen You”**

by the Rev. Eric H. Carswell

*“You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit” (John 15:16).*

What do you think about as you read the stories of the New Testament? Why did the Lord inspire the gospel writers to write them as they did? Much can be missed unless we recognize how close these stories are to our own lives. The whole drama of the New Testament can take place within the mind of each one of us. The characters in these stories are images of thoughts and concerns that at times dominate our conscious life. We can ask ourselves which parts of our minds are like the Pharisees, or the Samaritans, or the disciples. When we recognize how our different states of mind are imaged by characters in the New Testament, there is great power in seeing how the Lord reacted to these people. Whom did He condemn and whom did He praise? To whom did He pay special attention?

The twelve disciples are the focus of this sermon. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church tells us that the twelve disciples represent all things of love and faith, and therefore all things of the church (see *Arcana Coelestia* 4535e). They are an image of the Lord’s church. Their importance in the Lord’s ministry is undeniable. Traditional Christianity has tended to make the disciples into saints—nearly superhuman. They have been pictured as sitting in judgment on the rest of us mortals. Some people have thought that the happiness of heaven would come from feasting daily with the disciples. After all, they were the chosen twelve. But, in what way were they chosen?

Certainly there is a sense in which everyone is chosen by the Lord. Everyone is born for heaven. Within each of us is the material that the Lord wills to draw out, to teach and lead, just as He led and taught His disciples on earth.

Were the disciples special? The Lord did have great plans for the disciples. They would form the basis of the Christian Church. Their witness to the Lord’s teachings and to His crucifixion and resurrection gave Christianity its start. The Lord said that He had chosen them. So, in what way were they special?

In their own time the disciples would not have been recognized as being special, apart from their association with Jesus. They were, for the most part, poorly educated even by ancient standards. And they were also not very quick at understanding what the Lord was telling them. They often misunderstood the meaning of His words. Even after hearing a considerable number of parables, they still were not ready to grasp the Lord’s statement concerning the leaven of the Pharisees (see Matthew 16:5-12). The Heavenly Doctrine tells us that the disciples were so caught up in worldly and natural things that they often could not understand the Lord’s spiritual messages.

All of us are intellectually more sophisticated than the disciples were, yet this does not make us any more immune to misunderstanding what the Lord is trying to tell us. Facts do not make the quality of our thoughts as much as our affections do. There are times in our lives when we are equally as ignorant, equally as slow to understand, as the disciples were. Often our ignorance

comes not from never having been told what we should do, but rather from not understanding what we have been told. Our worries for the needs of this world can befuddle our thinking.

One of the great values of making time to attend church on Sunday is that we can quiet the inner noise of our daily worries and reflect on what the Lord is doing for us and what He wants each of us to do in our lives. We need to take time to think about spiritual things, because too often we can rush about, missing the plain and simple messages that the Lord is trying to tell us, just as the disciples so often missed what the Lord was trying to tell them.

If a great understanding was not what set the disciples apart and made them the chosen ones, then what did set them apart? Remember, the disciples represent the Lord's church in our lives. What makes that church? Was it the faith of the disciples that made them special? No, other people were complimented on their faith, such as the centurion who believed that the Lord could heal his servant without even coming to see him (see Luke 7:1-9), but the disciples are rarely complimented on their faith. In fact, many of the stories in the New Testament show that they often didn't have a very great faith. Remember how they were afraid that they all would drown in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, until the Lord rebuked the wind and asked them, "Where is your faith?" (Luke 8:25).

Peter, the very image or representative of faith, stepped out boldly to walk on the water when the Lord bade him come to Him, but after a few steps, the wind and waves were too much for him; he lost his trust and started to sink into the water. Crying out for help, Peter was raised up by the Lord and asked, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31). Later, the disciples said that they would die for Jesus, but they abandoned Him when He allowed Himself to be captured without resisting. They were not ready for the Lord's response to evil. They would probably have welcomed a glorious battle, but, in its most difficult times, the truly Christian life often does not appear to be the least bit glorious. So the faith of the disciples was not beyond what we can imagine. The Lord often reminded, and even chided, them about their lack of faith. No, the disciples don't seem to have been chosen because of their belief.

Sometimes we might think that the disciples were fortunate for having been able to see and hear the Lord. After all, they were allowed to witness His miracles. Would that have helped their faith? The Heavenly Doctrine states quite clearly that witnessing miracles has no effect on the formation of genuine faith (see *Divine Providence* 130-133). Actually, the disciples' closeness to Jesus was a stumbling block to them. The Lord had to prepare them for His crucifixion and His apparent abandonment of them. Nearly one fourth of the gospel of John presents a record of what the Lord told His disciples during His last evening with them to prepare them for what was soon to pass, and yet they still were not ready for it when it happened. Their faith was badly shaken.

The disciples' faith was not great and neither was their sense of charity. Remember they wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village, which had refused to receive them, and had to be rebuked by Jesus for what they wanted (see Luke 9:51-56). It was even specifically James and John who asked for this destruction, and they represent charity in intention and in deed! (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2135). Another time, the disciples argued among themselves about who would be the greatest of them (see Mark 9:33-37), and it was James and John who specifically requested to sit at the Lord's right and left sides when He would be in His glory (see Mark

10:35-41). Also, remember that the disciples tried to send away parents who wanted to bring their children to Jesus and had to be rebuked for thinking that the children weren't important enough for the Lord to be bothered with (see Mark 10:13-16).

Certainly the stories of the New Testament do not leave us with the impression that the disciples were saints. No, rather than a band of perfect heroes, the disciples appear much more like a family of imperfect and sometimes squabbling children, led by the Lord like a father. And how often do we look like the disciples—misunderstanding the Lord, mistrusting His care, and wishing evil on others? The Lord, our Father, can lead us with the same attention that He led the disciples, firmly and yet always with an underlying patience and gentleness.

That is, the Lord can lead us if we are willing to be led. The disciples were willing to be led. The Pharisees rejected the Lord and His teaching, feeling superior to Him. They were confident that they were the church, and they did not want to hear that some of their doctrines were wrong, that some of the things they were doing were wrong. So, we will not be able to be led if the part of our mind that is like the Pharisees dominates our life. Then, the Lord will look like our enemy.

The twelve disciples were special. They were chosen by the Lord. They had important jobs to perform. Without them the Christian Church would not have been founded. But they were not special because of their faith or their charity, but because they did follow the Lord and listen to Him, wondering at His words. Because they were willing to follow Jesus, they could hear Him—learn from Him, at times be scolded by Him, but above all, they could grow from His presence.

The disciples do form an image of the Lord's church. They form a picture of the Lord's church with us, as a group and as individuals. It is not a picture of perfection, and neither are we. The Lord's church is made of people who try, who stumble—people in desperate need of the Lord. The Lord chose the twelve disciples, and He has chosen us and appointed us, to go and bear fruit. Let us pray for the humility to listen to the Lord as He speaks to us. Let us seek His guidance as we make our decisions each day. May we be led to bear fruit that all may see and give thanks.

Amen.

Lessons: Luke 6:12-16; John 15:12-27; *Arcana Coelestia* 3857:6-7