

Sent Ones – Birds Not of a Feather
From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”
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Introduction

We’ve all heard the saying, “Birds of a feather flock together.” As many of you know, I’m always a little curious when I hear an interesting saying, so I like to find out where the saying comes from. In this case, no one knows for certain. Some people think it goes back to the 1500s. Some think it goes as far back as Plato, around 300 B.C.

We’re going to be hearing that phrase a lot today: “No one knows for certain.” As far as the saying goes, we don’t know where it came from, but most can figure out what it means.

Birds from the same species are often seen in groups. It might be ducks. It might be seagulls. It might be pink flamingoes. If you ask why birds do this, we can guess, but once again, no one knows for certain.



Maybe birds hang around in groups because it’s easier to find a mate. However, some birds, like pigeons, mate for life. Did you know that? Pigeons keep hanging around each other long after they found their mate.

In the end, no one is exactly sure why birds of a given species hang around together.

Of course, the phrase is applied to people, and it makes sense. If people have a strong interest in something, they like being with others who have the same interest.

We’re in our series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe.” We’re working our way through Matthew’s book about the life of Jesus. We’re now in a sub-series called, “Sent Ones.” Jesus wanted the world to hear his message, the Gospel. He chose 12 special men that he would send out to do it. So far, we’ve met Peter and Andrew, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew. In our last session, we met Thomas.

Today, we’re going to meet four more of these men: Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot. These men have (at least) two things in common: First, we don’t know much for certain about any of them. Next: Unlike birds of a feather, what little we know about them would normally make them avoid each other, rather than hang around together.

Today, our message has the title: Birds NOT of a feather. Let's try to meet these men.

I. Matthew

We'll start with Matthew. Before we start, surely someone will jump in and say, "Wait a minute! You said we don't know much about these men. Isn't our series called, 'The King and I – MATTHEW tells us about the King of the Universe.' Whenever you start a message in this series, you mention that we're working our way through MATTHEW'S book. So, what gives? The man has written one of the books of the Bible. Surely we know a lot about him?"

That all sounds very reasonable, but it would be wrong. It is true that Matthew wrote a whole book of the Bible. **However, in that book, he talks very little about himself.** There is something we can guess based on that:

Matthew was Humble

Matthew appears to have been a very humble man. We don't know for certain, but it seems Matthew was a man who cared much more about Jesus and his story than he cared about himself.

We all know people who take selfies, right? If those people run into a famous person, they make sure they get a picture that includes themselves along with the celebrity. Then they share it with all their friends.

Or, maybe we should use journalists as an example. We've all seen news shows where a reporter interviews a famous person. The famous person sits on one side. The interviewer sits on the other. The camera constantly goes back and forth between the famous person and the interviewer. When you watch these things, you're left with the distinct impression that the interviewer thinks of himself as very important.

Not so with Matthew. Matthew is content to stay in the background most of the time. He wants to make Jesus and his story stand out.

Question: What made Matthew so humble? Again, we don't know for certain, but let's see if we can get an idea. We spent a whole message on Matthew earlier, so we don't have to hit everything again. You can review by reading Matthew chapter 9.

Let's just hit the highlights.

Matthew immediately followed Jesus.

Jesus called Matthew to follow him. Matthew immediately followed Jesus, even though it meant leaving a lucrative job. Matthew didn't have to think, didn't have to consider. When Jesus called, he immediately followed. And he followed at great cost. His job paid a lot of money, and there were surely others in line happy to fill his position. Once Matthew left, there was no going back. Matthew understood who Jesus was and what Jesus was offering him.

Matthew was an inviter.

After leaving everything to follow Jesus, Matthew threw a party and invited all his friends. It appears that he shared a quality with Andrew and Philip. When Andrew was called, he immediately found his brother Peter and invited him. When Philip was called, he immediately went and found his good friend Bartholomew. These men all understood who Jesus was. And they understood what a rare privilege it was to have Jesus walking in their midst. What else could they do but invite people who they cared about?

It was the same for Matthew. He was an inviter, much like Andrew and Philip. He wasn't content to just meet Jesus and run. He invited his friends so they could meet Jesus, too.

Matthew was a tax collector.

Finally, Matthew was a tax collector. We've learned a lot about that crowd in our study of Matthew's book. Tax collectors were despised. When the Romans conquered a nation, they would hire local people to collect taxes. In ancient Israel, the people who did this were considered to be the lowest of the low. They were considered even lower than the Romans who occupied their country, because they helped the Romans hurt the Jewish people - And they did so because they were paid well to do it.

One of the most respected books of ancient Israel is called the Talmud. Here is what it says about this group: "It is righteous to lie to and deceive a tax collector." Tax collectors were not allowed to enter the temple, or even a synagogue.

So, here's an interesting thought: Writing history is a wonderful privilege. People remember what happened at any given time and any given place based on what people wrote about it. So, sometimes, it's tempting for someone who writes a history book to include facts about themselves that make them look good. They include their accomplishments. They leave out their failures.

If Matthew is the one writing a history of the life of Jesus, don't you think it would be tempting to do just that?

- Include things that he did well.
- Leave out things that weren't so complimentary.

If nothing else, when Matthew recorded his name, wouldn't it be tempting to leave out the part about being a traitor to his nation? But, Matthew does just the opposite. He highlighted his failures. We don't know much about Matthew for certain. Here's all we know, based on what he's told us: He was a terrible, terrible person. He was selfish. He was a traitor. But Jesus forgave him and called him to his side to be one of his closest followers - One of his "sent ones." That made him want to follow Jesus at any cost. That made him invite all his friends.

That's humility. Matthew is saying, "I want to be small - I want Jesus and his love to be big."

This is a man who understood grace. He understood what it means to be forgiven a great deal. When you're forgiven for a great deal, it creates humility.

We don't know much about Matthew with certainty. He could have spent time in his history book talking about his accomplishments. Instead, he talked about Jesus and his accomplishments. The only thing Matthew wanted people to know about him was the fact that he was a terrible person who was forgiven by Jesus.

Even though we don't know a lot about Matthew, he relates to many of us. He's everyone who failed. He's everyone who chose to hurt others instead of helping them. He's everyone who chose sin over righteousness. He's everyone who chose evil over good. ***He's everyone who did all those things, and then met Jesus.***

Have you met Jesus? Let us tell you how. There's some important information at the end of this article. Jesus can forgive any wrong you have ever done, no matter how large.

Have you met Jesus, but somehow, you've developed the bad habit of talking about yourself instead of him? Jesus can forgive that, too.

So, we've learned some things about Matthew.

II. James Son of Alphaeus

Let's move on to James, Son of Alphaeus. What do we know about him?

First, if you look at the list of apostles, or "sent ones", there are two men named James. There is James, the son of Zebedee and the brother of John. And there is James, the son of Alphaeus.

“James” was a common name in the days of Jesus, just as it is today. It comes from the root name “Jacob”, one of the two sons of Isaac. Just like today, if someone had a common name, you could attach it to their family name. If you know more than one person whose first name is “James”, you can introduce them as “James Smith” or “James Jones”.

In those days, you could also attach a person’s name to their home location. “Jesus” is also a common name. It comes from “Joshua”, a name that associates the word “salvation” with the name of God. So, sometimes Jesus is called “Jesus of Nazareth”, or “Jesus, son of Joseph”.

The other James that we met earlier, James, son of Zebedee, was one of the “core team” of the sent ones. So for now, we know one thing about James, son of Alphaeus with certainty: ***He’s not the other one.***

Now, there is another James that we run into in the Bible. Jesus had a brother whose name was James. He wrote the short book towards the end of the Bible. The one between Hebrews and I Peter.

There is some discussion about that James. Everyone who follows the Bible agrees that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. So, how did Jesus have a brother? Protestants say that after Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph went on to have more children. One of those children was named, “James.” If that is the case, then James would be more accurately called a “half-brother” of Jesus. He had the same mother, but a different father.

In Catholic tradition, Mary had to stay a virgin her whole life. People in that tradition say that Joseph might have been married previously and was a widower. So, he may have had children from the previous marriage. In that case, the James who wrote a book of the Bible would more accurately be referred to as a “Step-brother” of Jesus.

The protestant tradition makes more sense to me, but that’s a message for another day. In any case, we now know one more thing with certainty about James, the son of Alphaeus: ***He’s not James the half-brother of Jesus.***

So, here’s what we know with certainty about this man based on what’s written in the Bible. He’s not James, son of Zebedee. And he’s not James, the half-brother of Jesus. That’s it.

We think we know some things based on traditions of the early church. James, the son of Alphaeus is thought to have travelled to Persia, or modern-day Iran. Sadly, he ran into the same kind of persecution other apostles encountered, and he was eventually executed by crucifixion.

So, what’s the point of learning about this man if we can’t know anything for certain? There’s a big point! James the son of Alphaeus is all the people in the history of the Christian church who served God faithfully but were not rewarded with fame on this earth - And there are lots of those people.

For example, the most famous missionary to China was Hudson Taylor. However, there were lots of missionaries to China. But they're not famous like Hudson Taylor. Very few people know their names.

Do you know who knows their names? Jesus does. He is well aware of their service and their sacrifice. In fact, there are lots of people who are very faithful, but they're not famous. There are parents who sit up late at night with a crying child. There are people who help out in church, but they're something other than the pastor. The pastor stands in front of the church every week, and everyone in the church knows his name. But there are lots of folks who help out who are never seen. All those people may be forgotten by history, but they are remembered by Jesus.

James, the son of Alphaeus, is the friend to all those people.

Let's move on.

III. Thaddaeus

How about Thaddaeus? Well, we don't know a whole lot with certainty about this man, either.

This is what we know: We know that his name comes from a Hebrew word that today could be translated as "baby of the family." It might have been a nickname. He also had the name Judas, another common name. We'll learn about that in a minute. It might be that he went by his nickname, so people could tell him apart from Judas Iscariot.

Several of the apostles have unusual nicknames - At least, unusual by western standards. The name "Thomas" comes from a word that means, "twin". Peter was originally named, "Simon". Jesus gave him the name "Cephas" which means "rock". In those days, Greek was the most common international language. So, Cephas became "Petros", the Greek word for rock. Philip comes from Greek words meaning "lover of horses."

So, think about this: If you were to run into the apostles back in those days, and someone introduced you, they would do it in the following way: "First, I want you to meet Rocky. Next to him is the Twinstler. The guy in the corner is Horsey. Sitting next to him is James, not the other James. Oh, yeah, and right here is Baby-Face Judas."

As you can see, these were not men who were big on official-sounding titles.

So, the first thing we know about Thaddeus is that he had an unusual nickname. Let's read about the next thing we know over in John's gospel: There, Jesus was teaching something to his followers:

21 Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.”

22 Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, “But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?” (John 14:21-23)

So, here we have an apostle named Judas, but not Judas Iscariot. Let’s call him by the other name, “Thaddeus” to keep things straight. Jesus has been sharing a lot with his apostles. Thaddeus wonders if this is fair. He asks, “Hey, we appreciate that you’re telling us all these things, but what about the rest or the world?”

Here’s how Jesus replies:

“Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. (v 23)

In essence, Jesus says that his message is meant for everyone who is willing to listen and obey.

The tone of the answer Jesus gave is important. There were lots of times when people asked Jesus a question, and Jesus had to rebuke them. Here, Jesus just gives a straightforward answer. From this, we can assume that he thought Thaddeus was asking a good question.

So again, we have a man whom we don’t know much about. Thaddeus represents all the people in the history of the church that quietly and faithfully follow Jesus. They try to understand what he says. If they don’t understand, they ask. Often times, when you ask a question with a good heart, you get a good answer.

Thaddeus is all the people who don’t make any trouble. He’s the “Judas who isn’t Judas Iscariot.” And again, he represents all the people in history who faithfully follow, but who are not rewarded with a big place in the history books. Thaddeus will be rewarded someday in heaven by a God who sees all that he has done.

IV. Simon the Zealot

Finally, lets look at Simon the Zealot. Once again, we have a common name: Simon. Simon can be pronounced in the Hebrew “Shimon” or the English form “Simeon”. Simeon was the name of one of the twelve sons of the patriarch Jacob. Any of his children were said to be from the tribe of Simeon. And once again, because it’s a common name, there are two apostles who share it. Simon, also known as Peter, and Simon the Zealot. In this case, to make him stand out, this Simon is associated with a group.

What was that group? In ancient Israel, there were four major religious groups: The Pharisees, the Sadducees, and Essenes, and the Zealots. We've been over these groups in the past, so let's just review the Zealots. The Zealots believed that they should be very proud of their heritage - That meant their faith and the culture.

The people of Israel had been invaded on several occasions and occupied by foreign armies. Each time, there were those who would start blending in with the invaders. They might even help the invaders. Those people started losing their heritage.

Others resisted. They attempted to hold on to their heritage. The people who blended in or who helped the invaders were called 'Collaborators'. The Zealots were an official group who believed strongly in resistance. They believed so strongly that they sometimes felt led to attack people whom they viewed as collaborators. Those attacks might get physical. In some cases, Zealots would assassinate leaders who helped the Romans. There was an ancient historian named Josephus who referred to the Zealots as "The Dagger Men" because of their frequent assassinations.

Simon was a member of this group. That's all we know about him. That's it.

Simon is why we're calling our message, "Birds NOT of a feather." To many revolutionaries, there are those who help the revolution, and there are those who do not. Anyone who does not help throw off the oppressor is collaborating in some way. So, Simon would normally not want anything to do with the other apostles. And they wouldn't want anything to do with him.

To understand this further, let's look at some others in the group. We started today with Matthew. Tax collectors openly collaborated with the Romans. Because of that, Matthew would have been a prime target for an assassination. Even Jews who weren't zealots would want nothing to do with Matthew, or any group that would accept him.

We learned earlier that both Philip and Andrew had Greek names. They were holdovers from the days that some Jews collaborated with the Greeks. Those kinds of people would be next in line. If you had a Greek name and you wanted to show your zeal for your nation, you would change your name! Not so with these men. They had Greek names, and they hung on to them.

There were other differences among the apostles. Some of the apostles were fishermen - Some weren't. It's not that there was tension between fishermen and other groups, it's just that they had nothing in common with other groups.

So, we have a collection of men here who normally would not be hanging around with each other. What changed? One by one, each of them met someone who was bigger than they were alone. They met a man who had the answers. They met someone who caused them to leave behind the things that divided them. They met someone who drew them together.

That man was Jesus. Jesus was able to take a man who specialized in political assassinations and make him friends with a man who would previously have been a target. Jesus was able to take fishermen and make them friends of people who may have never seen a net or a boat close-up. And Jesus was able to do this with thousands of people. Almost everywhere he went Jesus was followed by crowds.

What was it that made Jesus able to do this? He was the Messiah – the one sent from God. He was the one who could return his people to their God.

Today, all over the world, we have a collection of people called the Church of Jesus Christ. They come from all kinds of backgrounds: Political backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, and economic backgrounds (to name a few). But they're all drawn together by their Savior, Jesus Christ.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

Today, we've met four men who, before meeting Jesus, had little in common. After they met Jesus, they had a great deal in common. They met the Messiah. They were the ones that the Messiah would use to spread his message: The Gospel.

They represent everyone who follows Jesus without a reward of fame or riches. In fact, what little notoriety or income they had, they sacrificed for him. They represent people from all kinds of backgrounds. But they come together around Jesus Christ.

Friends, Jesus calls us. He calls us to be saved from our sins. Let us tell you how. After that, he calls us to follow him. He does not offer an earthy reward. He offers a reward in heaven. He offers that reward to all who believe in him.

Would you commit today to follow him? Would you join in the great army of people who may have little in common other than a zeal to find God. If you join, that's exactly what you'll find.

Those people don't brag about who they are or what they've done. They boast about who God is and what he's done for them.

May God bless us as we learn to follow him. May God make us like his "sent ones."

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church
www.TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site
PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site:
PeaceWithGod.net
