

JESUS' STRANGE CELL GROUP.

Matthew 10v2-4

Still looking at the Biblical principles behind cell groups, I now want to look at Jesus' own small group. He chose twelve disciples to be with him. Of course we cannot take this analogy too far because there are some significant differences between this group and your cell. These were all men and all Jews. There were just twelve of them - that number had significance. They were also full-time disciples. They left their jobs to be in Jesus cell group. They also left their families; in Peter's case he had to leave his wife for weeks, sometimes months, on end. And of course, they were appointed apostles.

Nevertheless, try to think of Jesus and the twelve as a cell group. And imagine being given the option of either joining *that* group or one led by, say, *me!* Wouldn't everyone want to be in Jesus' group? If you opted for mine I would be worried about you. Think how exciting it would be to be in Jesus' cell group. And to be at such close quarters with Jesus Himself!

But there would be one big problem. There would be a bunch of others in the group with you who would certainly not be such an attractive proposition. We find a strange bunch of characters in Jesus' cell group.

In his book 'Everyone's Normal Till You Get to Know Them', (Zondervan 2003) John Ortberg writes, *"We are tempted to live under the illusion that somewhere out there are people who are normal. In the movie 'As Good As It Gets', Helen Hunt is wracked by ambivalence towards Jack Nicholson. He is kind and generous to her and her sick son, but he is also agoraphobic, obsessive-compulsive, and terminally offensive: If rudeness were measured in square miles, he'd be Texas. In desperation, Helen finally cries to her mother: "I just want a normal boyfriend." "Oh" her mother responds in empathy, "everybody wants one of those. There's no such thing, dear."*

Take a look at Jesus' twelve disciples and ask yourself if they were normal. Their names are listed in **Matthew 10v1-4**. If you think your cell group consists of the weird and the wonderful, take a look at this bunch. To help I will give each of them a cartoon caricature label.

1. Simon Peter: The Big Mouth: In every list Simon comes first. In our text the word for *"first"* can mean *"chief"*. Simon was leader of the apostolic band; frequently the spokesman; a fisherman, fiery, vocal, a man of strong opinions. The Gospels record his failings in detail: rebuked for trying to divert Jesus from the cross; bragging about how reliable he was compared to the other disciples; swinging a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane; denying Jesus with curses.

2. Andrew: The Second Fiddle: Andrew was the first of the twelve to attach himself to Jesus but he was constantly overshadowed by his larger-than-life brother. He is always referred to as *"Simon's brother"*! Isn't that annoying? He must have got used to taking second place. In first three Gospels he is only

ever mentioned in the lists of the twelve! Some of you will identify with Andrew in this: playing second fiddle. You may compare yourself unfavourably with a brother or sister or live in a parent's shadow; you might feel you play second fiddle at school or at work to someone close to you, or you find that others compare you with someone else.

3. James son of Zebedee: The Fiery Brother. James is mentioned before his more famous brother John, most likely because he was the older of the two. Both were fishermen and were typically impulsive Galileans. They were nicknamed "*Sons of Thunder*" possibly because, on one occasion, James and John suggested to Jesus that He incinerate a Samaritan village they were passing through.

4. John: The Beloved Enigma: John had been a follower of John the Baptist, and he came closest of all to Jesus Himself. He became known as the apostle of love, but this doesn't seem to have been his natural disposition. He was ambitious too. With James he looked for the place of importance alongside Jesus, possibly because he and James were related to Jesus. Jesus brought about an amazing change in John.

5. Philip: The Unpredictable Disciple: Philip was from Bethsaida, the same town as Peter and Andrew. We find no detail about him in first three Gospels, but John's Gospel records two incidents which show him to be somewhat unpredictable. One day he is impressive and the next he is dithering around. He introduces his friend Nathanael to Jesus with real decisiveness, but later on he isn't sure what to do with some Greeks who ask to see Jesus. Unpredictable people can be among the most trying people of all in a small group.

6. Bartholomew: The Local Rival: Bartholomew is also sometimes called Nathanael. He was from Cana in Galilee. This was a town close enough to Nazareth for there to be local rivalry. It was like Jesus, if he had been a Geordie, inviting a Mackem (someone from Sunderland) to join him! And when his friend Philip told him about Jesus, what was his reaction? "*Can anything good come out of Newcastle?*"

7. Thomas: The Natural Pessimist: In the Fourth Gospel Thomas is said to have been called Didymus": this is Greek for "twin". He is always thought of as "*doubting Thomas*" because at first he didn't believe Jesus had risen. Perhaps he was one of life's pessimists, someone who almost always expected the worst. Even good news (like Jesus being alive) was too good to be true. Thomas was probably not a bundle of laughs! Well, if you expect the worst you're never disappointed.

8. Matthew: The Hated Collaborator: Matthew, the tax collector! This was a reviled occupation - not just because people hate paying taxes, but because tax collectors exploited the people and could stop citizens anywhere at any time and demand to search their goods. They also worked for the enemy. In Matthew's case, he worked under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, who was a puppet ruler of the Romans. "*Murderers, robbers and tax collectors*" were

classed together by strict Jews. They were debarred from places of worship and their only friends were fellow outcasts. Galilean fishermen would have learned to hate Matthew because of the harsh taxes imposed on them. Now they were together. According to Henri Nouwen *“Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives.”* That’s what the others would have thought when Matthew was added to the cell group; and he wouldn’t have felt too comfortable either!

9. James son of Alphaeus: The Quiet Man: We know next to nothing about James the son of Alphaeus. He is an anonymous individual – it seems there was not much that was remarkable about him. He is just a name in the list of the Twelve. Many feel the same about themselves. But James the son of Alphaeus was still one of the Twelve. It is possible that he was the brother of Matthew because both he and Matthew are referred to as *“the son of Alphaeus”*.

10. Thaddaeus: The Other Judas: Thaddaeus is another disciple difficult to describe – there is so little information about him. But something about his name is fascinating. He was also known in the Gospels as – *Judas, the son of James; Judas, not Iscariot; or Judas the Zealot: Judas* started off as a proud name; Judas the Galilean was a famous warrior (like William Wallace might be to Scots – for those who remember the film *‘Braveheart’*) He had been the founder of the Zealot movement and had led an insurrection against the Romans in the north. He had been successful – until the full might of Rome was turned on him and the movement was ruthlessly wiped out. Thousands had been crucified. To be called Judas, and to be a Zealot carried some street cred with many Jews. But now he has another name, Thaddaeus. Why? Was he given a new name to distinguish him from Judas Iscariot and because that name was now tainted?

11. Simon the Zealot: The Freedom Fighter: If the Gospels hint that Thaddaeus was a Zealot, there is no doubt about this Simon. He is always referred to as *Simon the Zealot*. He had almost certainly been a man of violence. The Zealots were fanatical freedom fighters - or terrorists, depending on your point of view. These Zealots were feared. They would be called *“insurgents”* today! They had begun to terrorize Jewish towns and assassinate fellow Jews - whenever someone was suspected of being a collaborator they were fair game. Once again, what a choice for one of the Twelve! In this group Simon the Zealot would soon see Jesus heal a Roman Centurion’s servant. And people like Matthew were marked men for Zealots. What a cell group!

12. Judas Iscariot: The Notorious Traitor: *“Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him”*. This Judas is forever labeled as the traitor. Yes, he was one of the Twelve too. But what do we know about him? One of the few clues about his background is his name - *Iscariot*. This could mean *“dagger-bearer”*: one group of Zealots was known as the *“Sicarii”*, *“the assassins”*. They derived their name from the *“sica”*, a small curved sword they carried beneath their robes. Some believe Judas’ name *‘Iscariot’* reflects this. Or it could refer to his home town. *“Iscariot”* would then be a combination *‘Ish’* (a Hebrew term

for “a man”) and ‘*Kerioth*’ a town in Judea. In this case he was the only southerner among the Twelve. Judas leaves us with more questions than answers. Here’s just one. How could he be with Jesus for three years and betray Him? He was a trusted disciple. At the Last Supper he even sat next to Jesus. But he betrayed Jesus, selling him for 30 pieces of silver (the going rate for a slave), and sealing his act of treachery with a kiss. Judas was in Jesus’ cell group - a sobering thought. Some who follow Jesus - end up renouncing Him, turning away from Him, rejecting His love and publicly betraying His trust. What a terrible prospect

What a motley crew! I have caricatured them, but they were not without their strengths. Even in weakness they could show courage and faith and devotion. Andrew, the overshadowed brother was forever introducing others to Jesus. John’s Gospel mentions three occasions, and yes, the first was introducing his brother who was to overshadow him! Thomas, may have been a pessimist, but when the other disciples were getting cold feet he said “*let’s go to Jerusalem and die with Him!*” Simon Peter denied Jesus, but he made a historic declaration that Jesus was Messiah at Caesarea Philippi and *he was there* in the high priest’s courtyard when the others were hiding out of fear. James & John’s impulsive requests of Jesus concerning fire from heaven and top seats in His Kingdom show that they believed in Him. Although He was a penniless Galilean preacher, rejected by the people who mattered, they were His men through and through.

But time and time again these twelve showed their frailty. And yet Jesus chose them to be with Him. They were His cell group. Jesus’ cell wasn’t a “normal” group of people. So, how do you feel about your cell now? And what about *you*? John Ortberg says “*We try to separate the world into normal, healthy people (like us) and difficult people.*” Perhaps every single one of us is living in cloud cuckoo land. We are no more normal than the next person. We come with all our flaws and idiosyncrasies and foibles. Other people have to put up with us!

Jesus’ disciples may have been an odd bunch but they were the people Jesus wanted to be with Him. Yes, with all their weaknesses, inconsistencies, failures & misunderstandings. And it is the same with you and me and those in our cell group. Why does He so love to choose weak people like us? When God explained to Israel why he had chosen such a weedy nation to be His covenant people He declared “*I loved you because I loved you, because I loved you.*” There’s our answer! He chooses us to magnify His love and grace. Jesus loves you, and the others in your group - with all your faults and failings. This magnifies His love and His glory.

And what a difference Jesus makes to a group of frail people! Eleven of the twelve disciples were transformed by Jesus’ death and resurrection and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. It resulted in great courage. They spread the good news of Jesus like wildfire. They “*turned the world upside down.*” Jesus can make the most unlikely groups of people into world changers.

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