

The Transforming Power of God in Unlikely People

It takes time and the skill of the Master Potter to craft a vessel that will be fit for His use in the end.

Suppose you had been assigned the task of inquiring into the qualifications of those who sought to become disciples of Jesus. Suppose you were asked to examine their credentials. How would you have voted on them?

Let's examine our first candidate. He has just come up from the beach. His fishing boat, drawn up on the pebbled shore, has worn seats, patched sails and the high rudder that is characteristic of Galilean fishing craft.

His hands are rough, calloused and strong. He smells of fish!

He is not at all refined or cultured or educated. Blustering, blundering, clumsy and impulsive, he does not strike us as being material for the ministry.

Then, too, his age is against him. Why, he is 40 if he is a day.

His ideas will be very hard to change. He will be stubborn, set in his ways. He is a rough man, and he has lived a rough life. When provoked, he is liable to burst into profanity, and his vocabulary is lurid.

Can you imagine this big fisherman as a disciple of Jesus? He would not be your choice, would he? No, we'd better send Simon back to his nets.

The next candidates are brothers. They, like Simon Peter, are fishermen. They come from the same village, from the same colony of rough, strong men who work with their hands for a living.

But you are not going to hold that against them, are you? Remember the Lord Himself was a carpenter.

There is no shame in manual labor, and would it not be to a preacher's advantage to know what it is to do manual labor? Would it not be excellent preparation for the ministry?

These two men are looking at you. Their eyes are steady, accustomed to far distances. They are good weather prophets.

A glance at the sky and a look at the lake, and they can tell you what is brewing. They know the signs of the sudden squalls that whistle through the mountain passes and come screaming down to make the water dangerous.

They operate a boat in partnership, and they are very successful. In fact, they always catch more than the other boats and manage to get better prices for their catch. This naturally does not increase their popularity among the fishermen.

They are not modest men. They have earned for themselves the nickname, "the sons of thunder," because they are always rumbling about something.

They have little patience with people who cross them, and they would be inclined to call down fire from heaven to burn them up. Get rid of objectors! That's their motto.

They are ambitious men, and if the stories are true that are whispered about them, they have been brought up to believe that if you want anything in life—grab it. Their mother had taught them that to get on in the world you have to push.

They would want to be in the chief places. If they became disciples of Jesus, they would naturally want to be His chief lieutenants—one on His right hand and the other on His left. If we took time to hear from people who know them, our verdict would be unanimous that James and John simply would not do.

More Unlikely Candidates

So let us pass on to the next candidate. There is a wild gleam in his eyes—and no wonder. He is a member of the Underground. He seems to be the fanatical type, impatient and nervous.

His hands itch to reach up and haul down the hated pennants of Rome that hang in desecration from the walls of old Jerusalem. His blood boils when he is forced, by some clanging legionnaire, to make way on the pavement and step into the gutter.

He dreams of the day when the kingdom will be restored to Israel. His eyes dance at the thought of the Messiah, at the head of a liberating army, driving the hated Romans into the sea.

He wants, more than life itself, to be a part of that glorious campaign that would rise up to bring back the glories of David and Solomon. But this young man might be too dangerous. He is a great risk—a very great risk. We could not take a chance on Judas. We dare not.

Well, what about this fellow? He, too, is a fisherman. Let's not hold that against him.

If you are not a tradesman, a shepherd or a farmer, there isn't much else for you to do but fish.

This man might have it in him to be a disciple. He is not impulsive by any means. He will not be swept off his feet.

He is very cautious, slow to convince. He must have been born in some little Palestinian "Missouri." You have to show him.

He demands proof for everything. He'll take nothing on faith. This character will slow up the work of any group to which he belongs. He has only two speeds—dead slow and stop.

Can you imagine him as a member of the apostolic band? Always

advocating delay. But the kingdom is a venture of faith—not of doubt.

It is a matter of perception—not of proof. How could Thomas possibly fit into that picture?

If we were Jews, living at the time the disciples were originally chosen, we would boo or hiss as this next candidate enters, for he has sold out to the army of occupation and is collecting taxes for the Roman government.

Think of how the collaborators were regarded in Norway and France during and after WWII, and you have some idea of the feelings that run against this man. Tax collectors are seldom the most popular men in any community, and this fellow is a racketeer to boot. He has made many enemies and made himself rich as well.

He has a mind like an adding machine. Money and evidences of wealth alone impress him.

That's bad enough, but he is also a genealogist. He is one of those men whose passion is family trees. He will bore you with long recitals of the best families—where they came from, to whom they were married, how many children they had, and on and on.

Can you imagine him as a friend of Jesus—a man who had made a god of money walking with the Carpenter from Nazareth? No, Matthew must be rejected.

Does anyone know about this fellow Andrew? I know that he is Peter's brother, but I know of no good reason why he should be chosen.

There are others still waiting—Bartholomew, Thaddeus, Philip, another James and a man called Simon from Canaan. They are all interested in becoming disciples, but I know of no particular reason why we would vote for any of them.

Chosen by God

Yet these are the very men whom Jesus chose to be His disciples. They had more influence on the course of human history than any other dozen men who ever lived.

Each man was different. Had you and I been voting, we would have rejected every one of them. Yet Mark tells us in his gospel that Jesus chose them, "that they should be with Him and that He might send them forth to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses, and to cast out devils" (Mark 3:13-19, KJV).

They were with Him for three years in intimate fellowship. They walked with Him and lived with Him.

They heard His incomparable parables. They listened to every sermon He ever preached. They saw with their own eyes each one of His wonderful miracles.

They saw the blind receive their sight, the lame throw away their crutches. They saw withered limbs become straight and strong. They even saw the dead raised to newness of life.

Yet these things did not change these men. During the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry, they were quarreling among themselves. They were jealous of one another.

They were not very brave. When Jesus was arrested they all ran away. After He died they scattered and went underground, meeting behind closed doors.

They did not have much faith. Thomas refused to believe that the Master had risen from the dead until he had proof. He even stipulated what that proof had to be.

Of course these three years did something to them and in them. The fuel had been laid on the fire, but it was not lit.

The seed had been sown, but it had not germinated. All the possibilities of change in them had been created, but the

changes had not yet happened.

What did change them? Not the crucifixion or the resurrection but the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Not until these men were filled with the Holy Ghost were they changed. Not until the Spirit had come upon them in power were they changed so that cowardice gave place to courage. Unbelief became a flaming faith and conviction that nothing on earth could shake.

Jealousy was swallowed up in brotherly love. Self-interest was killed and became a ministry to others. Fear was banished, and they were afraid of no man, no threat and no danger.

Changed by the Holy Spirit

Therein lies our hope. We have not seen Jesus as they did nor heard the sound of His voice. We have never seen the sunlight dance on His hair or traced His footprints in the sands of Palestine.

But we have the same opportunity to be changed because the same Holy Spirit is available to us today. He has been sent into the world to lead us into all truth, to convict us of sin, to be our Helper, our Guide.

This is a day when many are inclined to say, "You can't change human nature." It is true. We cannot change human nature; but God can.

It is the modern heresy to think that human nature cannot be changed. Human nature must be changed if we are ever to have an end to war or the situations that make our lives uneasy and our hearts sore.

The power of Jesus Christ is the only force that can change people for good. It is the only power in the world that can give us the right motives to do what God wants us to do.

Nothing else can bring us to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33) and to want most of all to be a part of the answer to the world's ills rather than part of its problems.

All that is needed is a sincere desire and willingness to confess our mistakes and our stubborn selfishness and face up to our sins.

When our sins are acknowledged and we ask for His forgiveness, we begin to see ourselves as God sees us, and the miracle begins. Forgiveness can be ours, and we can become new people from that moment.

When you begin to be a new person, there is hope for your problems—whatever they are. There is hope for a solution to the strained relations in your office, for better understanding and a discovery of a new love for your husband or your wife.

There can be a new spirit in your home and a new happiness you thought was gone forever. You can have hope for a new meaning to your life—a new reason for a living hope.

Don't give up; there's still hope. God hasn't given up yet on His world. God hasn't given up on this country, and God hasn't given up on you.

He can still do great things for you, in you and through you. God is ready and waiting and able. What about you and me?

We are, after all, like lumps of clay. We have little shape or beauty. But we need not despair.

If we are clay, let us remember there is a Potter and His wheel. We have only to be yielded, that is, willing and surrendered, and He will do the rest.

He will make us according to the pattern for which, in His love, He designed us. And it will be good—for our own good and

for His glory.

Do not despair. If you want to be different, you can be. You, too, can be changed for the better. Therein lies our hope—and the hope of the world.

We, too, are disciples in clay. And there is still the skill of the Potter.

Peter Marshall (1902-1949) was the husband of Catherine Marshall and the father of Peter John Marshall. Dr. Marshall served as the pastor of the historic New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., and as chaplain of the United States Senate. His biography, *A Man Called Peter*, written by his wife, became a best-seller and the basis for a highly acclaimed motion picture.