

Apprenticeship for the Kingdom of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the significance of the Lord's choice of twelve apostles and the essential nature of the new Israel, which is constituted on the basis of Christ and has a faculty for spiritual knowledge and understanding.

Scripture: Mark 3:13

Topics: "Spiritual Identity", "Discipleship"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of Jesus' deliberate choice of the twelve apostles as a foundational act for establishing a new Israel and a new Kingdom of God. He explains that this apprenticeship involves being with Christ to learn and grow spiritually, which is essential for effective ministry and service. The sermon highlights the spiritual constitution of the new Israel, characterized by a unique relationship with God as Father, and the necessity of the cross in realizing this new identity and purpose. Sparks encourages believers to embrace their spiritual inheritance and the transformative power of Christ in their lives, as they are called to be part of God's Kingdom. Ultimately, the message calls for a deeper understanding of our identity in Christ and the importance of spiritual growth through discipleship.

Transcript

"And he goeth up into the mountain, and calleth unto him whom he himself would: and they went unto him. And he appointed twelve, that they might be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach" (Mark 3:13,14).

The thought of "apprenticeship" is, of course, something included and implied in the words "disciple" and "discipleship". "He appointed twelve, that they might be with him, and that he might send them forth..." You will notice the very precise terms in which this statement was made. This choosing of the twelve was a quite deliberate, calculated, considered, far-reaching and significant act. At another time the Lord Jesus said: "I know whom I have chosen" (John 13:18). And again: "Did not I choose you the twelve?" (John 6:70). From Luke's account (Luke 6:12,13) we know that His choice followed a night spent alone with His Father in prayer. Yes, it was a very deliberate act, prayed over and considered, with a very large background in His own mind; it was far from casual. These are not just independent comments upon it or statements about it; they are supported by, and are indeed the very teaching of, the Scriptures. We shall see that as we go on.

"And he chose... twelve" (Luke 6:13). What a dangerous thing for Him to do! But what a significant thing for Him to do! That number was a well-understood number in Israel. Were there not twelve Patriarchs? Were there not twelve tribes? Twelve is one of the great, dominant numbers of the Bible, particularly in relation to Israel. Now that is deliberately laid hold of by the Lord Jesus, and brought over as the very beginning of the movement into the new dispensation; and so we have the twelve apostles. And in many other ways that number comes into view, both in itself and in its multiples, in relation first of all to Israel. In the new Jerusalem, at the end of the Revelation (Rev. 21:10 - 22:5), we have twelve foundations to the walls. The city itself is 12,000 furlongs in each direction. It has twelve gates of twelve pearls. There are twelve angels. In the seventh chapter of the same book the number of the sealed is a multiple of twelve: 144,000 --twelve times twelve thousand. And so we could go on.

Are you beginning to see something more in this deliberate act of the Lord Jesus? I say, it was not casual. He knew what He was doing. When He did this, He was doing, in one sense, the most dangerous thing that He could do. For of course all the nation of Israel, and especially their rulers, would jump to but one conclusion from this that He was doing. In their minds there would at once arise the thought: "Oh, he is setting up another Israel, is he? I see!" AND SO HE WAS! That is just the point. With Him, the Israel that has been is set aside and repudiated. With Him another is brought in. To the twelve He said: "You shall sit upon twelve thrones" (Matt. 19:28). Now this number, twelve, in Bible symbolism, as you probably know, is the number of government, of administration. Israel knew that, and so, of course, immediately grasped the implication of choosing twelve. "He is setting up a new government, a new administration!" Yes, He was! -- but a very different one, as we shall see.

Twelve is the number of government. Consider its factors -- three and four. Three is always the number of heavenly government, divine fullness of government, the very Godhead over all. Four is clearly the number of earthly government: earthly conditions are characterized by the number four. North, south, east and west comprehend the earth; spring, summer, autumn, winter comprehend the seasons; and so we could go on. Heavenly and earthly government are embodied in this number twelve. And that is very significant as to this act of the Lord Jesus. We recall that, when the covenant was made to Abraham, he was told that his seed should be as the sand on the seashore, as the stars of the heaven (Gen. 22:17). But now we call back the words of Paul: "To Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Gal. 3:16). Heavenly and earthly government meet in Christ.

The choice of twelve, then, brought into view, first of all the new Israel, and then the new government by that Israel of heaven and earth; and that new Israel is the church, as represented by the twelve. But this Israel, we repeat once more, is something very different from the old. It is a spiritual posterity, the fruit of His travail, the seed that He should see because of it (Isaiah 53:10,11). It is spiritual, as being a people who inherit, take over, the real spiritual meaning of that nation that was called "Israel" -- "prince with God" (Gen. 32:28). There, inherent already in the very name, is the governmental element.

Now, of the "Israel after the flesh" many things were said, as to their pre-eminence, being the head of the nations, "the head, and not the tail" (Deut. 28:13), and so on. As we know, they failed in this. But God's principles do not go when His instruments fail. When anything which God chooses, in order to express His principles, fails to do so, He does not abandon the principles. He may have to abandon the vessel or the instrument, but He will go on with His principles. And so it is in this case: the principle is taken over, and the fulfilment of this conception -- a prince with God, the head and not the tail, the head of the nations -- is found in the new Israel.

That, then, is the setting. Let us get closer to it. It has two major aspects: firstly, the essential nature of this Israel, and then the essential apprenticeship unto the Kingdom.

The Essential Nature of the Israel of God

We have said that this seed of Christ is spiritual in constitution. We spent some time on that, as seen in John 3, in our last meditation, but let us just touch on it again. In the Israel after the flesh, you have an actual people on this earth whom you can recognise. You can see that they are -- physically and in other ways -- a nation, a people. Now, however physical features may manifest themselves in us, the constitution of the new Israel is not a physical constitution, a constitution of physical features: it is essentially a spiritual constitution. That is, it has in the first place nothing to do with anything outward at all. It has to do with CHARACTER. This Israel is constituted on the basis of another character, and that character is Christ. Its very constitution is Christ.

A New Knowledge

It is a nature constituted, in the first place, with a faculty for KNOWLEDGE which is altogether outside of the reach and range of any other kind of person. Here again we come back to John 3. "Except a man be born anew, he cannot see... Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom..." This thing is beyond him in sight, in knowledge, in understanding, to say nothing of inheritance. This Israel is an Israel that has a seeing capacity which the old had not and no other has. It is constituted this way.

This is, mark you, not merely a statement of truth. This is something very searching for US, as to our being children of God, being the spiritual children of the travail of Christ. This is not something that is extra to the Christian life, or for those who advance to certain heights and degrees. Right from our new birth, you and I, every one of us, ought to have a faculty of spiritual understanding and perception and knowledge that is possessed by no other person outside this Kingdom! We could spend much time in pointing out the tragedies that have come into Christianity because of failure to recognise or live up to this. I would go so far as to say that the largest proportion of all the trouble between Christians is due to either a lack of, or a failure to live on, the basis of spiritual understanding, spiritual discernment, spiritual perception, spiritual knowledge. There is any amount of natural knowledge in the Christian world: Bible knowledge, prophetic knowledge, and what not. But spiritual knowledge is a rare commodity; and yet it is supposed to be a constituent of our new birth from above, a faculty that we ought to have.

Now, if you are thinking: "Then woe is me -- I don't know much about that!", the Lord is simply saying to you: "Look here, this is yours by rights. It is not some extra thing to which you attain by struggle and effort, or by years of laborious Christian living, or by some specific act, some terrific upheaval in your spiritual life. It is a BIRTH thing, it is a BIRTH right: you have a RIGHT to this!" But it may be that, after all, you DO know in this way, although you do not know that you know! You have a new sense, a new faculty, a new "something" in you, that causes you to know -- in some measure at least -- what is of the Lord and what is not, what is spiritual and what is not. But oh for the increase of that! It is the development of THAT, the increase of THAT, which is the apprenticeship in the school of Christ. We learn by mistakes, we learn by blunders, but the thing that we are learning is not something objective. We are learning inwardly that such and such is not the way of life and we should do well to avoid it; and that such and such IS the way of life, and that is the way for us to go. We learn it inwardly. It is a new kind of knowledge.

A New Power

This spiritual Israel is constituted also with a new kind of POWER. This particular kind of seed, or divine progeny, has a power, an ability, a strength, which is quite different. One of the things that we learn in this apprenticeship, in this school, if we are apt pupils, if we are really abandoned to know the Lord, is that the Lord will deliberately undercut and undermine our natural strength. He will bring us to positions where the very best natural strength of any kind cannot cope with the situation; where, if we are to go through, we shall require a strength that is not in us by nature at all, even though we might be the very best specimens of humanity. We come back to Nicodemus. "You just cannot", said the Lord to Nicodemus, "you just CANNOT. You may be as willing as anybody could be, you may be as anxious and as interested, but what stands over you is CANNOT." The great question, arising again and again from Nicodemus' lips, is: "How...?", "How...?" He cannot. But this seed has something of a strength which is different, quite different from all that. Peter speaks of it as: "the strength which God supplieth" (1 Pet. 4:11). It is an ability of another order.

And so we could go on with the constitution. But it will all amount to this -- that it is of another generation. It is of the generation of Christ. There are here capacities and possibilities and resources which are from Heaven, which cannot be accounted for on earth at all.

In point of fact, the old Israel was put onto that basis, though in a symbolic or typical way. We pointed out in our last study that they were put onto the basis of Christ, and we saw just what it meant for them to be put onto that basis. When everything went wrong with them spiritually and morally, and they were unworthy of the name of Israel, they were just rooted up from the land. Those twelve sons of Jacob, behaving as they did -- putting Joseph in the pit, deceiving their father, and even counselling murder, and then the exposure of them before their brother whom they did not recognise in Egypt -- it is a sorry tale. What breakdown! What failure! And so Israel must be put on to the ground of Christ, through death and resurrection; they must come into the meaning of His travail, be born out of it. Then their life afterwards must be constituted on the same basis, the basis of Christ, so that, for those ensuing forty years in the wilderness, there is no accounting for their bread or their water, or for anything else, on any other ground than that of heaven. "It was not Moses that gave... the bread...; but my Father..." (John 6:32). It was heavenly. You see the point: they were constituted according to Christ, with resources that are not explicable on any other ground than that they are from heaven.

Thank God for that! It is the most wonderful thing to live on Christ -- to live on heavenly ground! Perhaps you are thinking that this spiritual life must be a very difficult one. Well, for the flesh, of course it is! For the natural man, of course it is! To the self-life, it certainly is. But the spiritual life is a romance. What the Lord does -- oh, it is just wonderful. How my heart went with a brother whom I recently heard speaking about ministry! Would not our flesh always like to have everything well worked out and mapped and planned in advance -- have it all there, so that to give the word is really no trouble at all! But the Lord shuts us up and holds us up, and gets us into a perfect travail over a message, waiting so often until the very last minute -- and then it comes! That is a personal testimony of over thirty years. It is something wonderful. This is no theoretical matter. It is marvellously real, and really marvellous.

That is the nature and constitution of this new Israel. This seed is a mystery, this Israel is a mystery; everything to do with it is a mystery. It cannot be understood by natural means at all. But do not take that the wrong way, interpreting it to mean that we have got to be very "mysterious" people! There are many people trying to be mysterious, under the mistaken idea that that is spirituality. But this mystery is the mystery of a LIFE.

The Mystery of Spiritual Life

Of course, even life in the natural is a mystery. We cannot explain life; we do not know what life is. It is the greatest reality, and yet it is the thing which is most impossible of explanation. But in the real realm of the spiritual there is another life, and this life is an even greater mystery. It is a life that persists in spite of everything that can be set against it. The mystery about the church, about the people of God, is the mystery of this life -- how it survives, how it goes on, how it increases. There is nothing in all this universe which is so assaulted, so set against, as this life of the people of God. All the dark, sinister forces of Satan seem to have but one ultimate object -- namely, in some way to quench this life. All the experiences through which the Lord allows His people to go (and sometimes takes them), which, looked at naturally, could be said to be death, are only allowed in order to bring out this wonderful reality -- that there is a life which, when put to the test, subjected to every kind of trial, survives, overcomes.

The power, persistence, and progress of this life are a mystery. The more the children of Israel were oppressed, the more they grew. Carry that over into the spiritual Israel. It looks today very much as though the evil forces -- hell and men -- are reducing the church, by putting to death, or by driving out of triumphant faith, many of the Lord's people. Ah, but that is not the end of the story. These blind instruments of evil are fools -- they cannot read history. If they could, they would see that what they are doing is the very thing that is going to accomplish what they are trying to frustrate. Oh, no -- make no mistake about it: long centuries of terrible ordeal have proved this, that there is a persistence and an increase here that is a mystery; you cannot explain or account for it naturally at all.

That should be true of every child of God. So take hope, take heart, dear tried one. If you are feeling that your way is more death than life, that the ordeal is tending to be one of total reduction, remember that that is not the end of the story.

The Essential Apprenticeship for the Kingdom

I come now to this matter of the "essential apprenticeship", as I am calling it, for the Kingdom of God. That is, the Lord Jesus chose twelve -- and we have seen the significance of His act -- "that they might be with him, and that he might send them forth". Here are two halves of one thing, essential halves. "Be with him" -- why? That He might teach, that He might instruct, that He might equip, IN ORDER THAT He might send forth. All going forth must issue from the closest association with Christ in His school. And all association with Christ in His school must issue in going forth! The Lord does not want people shut up in monasteries and cloisters, and places like that, always studying and learning, accumulating knowledge of things, even though they might be heavenly things. Every bit of God-imparted knowledge is to be for practical purposes. And no practical activity which does not come out of God-imparted knowledge will affect the Kingdom of God. So these are the two things.

Note that all Christ's teaching, instructing, training of the twelve came out of His own spiritual life. It did not come out of books; it did not come out of the schools. This was a thing that baffled the scholars of His day. "Whence... hath this man all these things?" (Matt. 13:56). "How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?" (John 7:15). He was not a man of the schools; He was not a man of the library, of the study. It all came out of His own spiritual life. He had a spiritual knowledge which was unique. It differed entirely from every other kind of knowledge.

The Fatherhood of God

For one thing -- and this was the basis of everything else -- His knowledge of the Father was unique. Consider this statement: "No one knoweth who the Son is, save the Father; and who the Father is, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him" (Luke 10:22). "No one knoweth who the Father is, save the Son". That is a sweeping statement, a tremendous claim! But His unique knowledge of the Father sprang, not out of studying, not out of contemplating, but out of the inward spiritual oneness between the Father and Himself.

Now note this: the Fatherhood of God was not a DOCTRINE, preached by Jesus to the general public. You can confirm that from the record in the Gospels. It was a MYSTERY, disclosed to His disciples in private. The Fatherhood of God was no doctrine with Jesus, no theory: it was a reality in His own spiritual life and in His own spiritual being. To the twelve He made the Fatherhood of God real -- not by argument, nor by much speaking, but because the Father was to Him the supreme reality in His life. All His training of the twelve came out of that; His teaching came out of that. And you note how much there was in His teaching of them and training of them which centred in the Father. How often did He refer to or address the Father! If you are not impressed, look it up again. This was the heart of everything in His training of these men. His teaching on prayer was all based upon that. "After this manner... pray ye: Our Father..." (Matt. 6:9). I repeat: this was not for the general public. It was something on the inside of the school; it was a mystery disclosed alone to those on the inside. But it was made real.

This new Israel has to be constituted on that basis. Just as the Lord Jesus trained the twelve on the basis of His union with the Father, so all our training will be through our union with Christ -- a union as vital as was His with the Father: so that we, in union with the Son, may ourselves come into the mystery and wonder of the Fatherhood. It is a secret within this spiritual seed, within the Israel of God: the wonderful secret of the Fatherhood, not as a title, but as a great reality. How much we should be saved from if that became as real in our beings as it was in His! From beginning to end His reference is to the Father, His deference is to the Father; His appeal is always to the Father. The controlling reality in all His movements is the Father; everything for Him comes from the Father. The last words that He uttered were addressed to the Father: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). It was this that kept Him strong, it was this that kept Him right. It was the great motive force in His refusing everything that the Devil offered Him; it was His motive power in enduring suffering. The Father was everything to Him, in every way -- "all in all"; a deep inward reality.

I suggest that we lack something vital in constitution if we lack an adequate sense of our spiritual union with God as our Father in Christ Jesus. When we get as near to Him as that, or get Him as near as that, we begin to see something. Because, you see, the Lord Jesus sought to inculcate into the disciples, the new Israel, the meaning of this relationship between Himself, as Son, and the Father. It was something of practical account in their relationship with one another. For He was not constituting a kind of clientèle or following, a new movement of people of common interests: He was constituting a family

That is made so clear by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews: "He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying, I will declare thy name unto my BRETHREN... I and the children which God hath given me" (Heb. 2:11-13). In effect, and in definite statement, the Lord is saying: "Now, I want you to realise that you are all brethren, you are all of one family, because you are children of one Father in the deepest reality of your constitution. That is the basis on which you should regard one another and behave toward one another. You are to cherish and care for one another, even as I have loved you." You see, this is the same thing: "Having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end" -- to the uttermost (John 13:1). That was only making practical in their corporate life the relationship between Himself and His

Father, the Father and Himself. It was a training.

Discipline

Mark you, it was a discipline, too, a real discipline: for if ever there were twelve diverse kinds of people on this earth, it was these twelve. Yes, there was something there of every kind. Temperamentally, constitutionally, naturally, they would fly into fragments at any moment. There is nothing here naturally of cohesion, integration. But under His hand, in His school, something is going to happen. At any rate, if the symbolism of the book of the Revelation means anything at all, there is something fairly solid in its last chapters! For we read that "the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Rev. 21: 14). Here they are making one solid basis for the everlasting Kingdom. Something has happened.

Now that is what the Lord is trying to do with us. If you feel that you cannot get on with another child of God, just ask Him to move them away, or move you away, and see what happens! You will find that you have got into the realm where the Lord takes no notice of your prayer -- at least until something has happened in you. The Lord lets us go through all the "sand-papery" and difficulty of these contradictory dispositions and temperaments amongst His children. We think: "Oh, wouldn't it be good if only He would take that very difficult person away!" But it seems that the Lord does nothing about it, on the outside. No, He is going to do something on the inside. He may eventually take them away, but not until that something inside has been done. That is a part of the apprenticeship to the Kingdom. How can we rule or reign together in the Kingdom, if we are all in a state of mutual contradiction and conflict? No, the Lord is not going to have a kingdom like that, nor a government like that.

So, their being "with Him" was for the purpose of deep practical instruction and teaching in all this meaning of the Fatherhood of God, that this deep secret and mystery might find its expression in a corporate life.

This matter of training covers a vast amount of ground, and many other aspects than the one that I have mentioned. Let me just point out this. While it is true that the Kingdom came on the day of Pentecost, the New Testament speaks of the Kingdom in three tenses -- past, present and future: it has come, it is coming, and it has yet to come. It is with a view to that coming now and yet to come that you and I are being trained. We are in school now for the present coming of the Kingdom. It will not come, except through the discipline of those who are called into fellowship with Christ. And the final manifestation and appearing of the Kingdom is something for which a great preparation is going on, a preparation of us all. Whatever may be involved in this apprenticeship, this training, in relation to the Kingdom, in every one of its aspects, it is of the greatest importance that we recognise this. We are in school with a view to the Kingdom.

No Realisation Without the Cross

Whatever may have been the aspect of the training in the case of the disciples, notice how Jesus held everything to the cross. He leaves the multitude, He leaves the world, and takes these men apart with Himself: He speaks to them of deep things, wonderful things -- and then He heads it all up to His going to Jerusalem, being delivered into the hands of the rulers and crucified. (See Matt. 16:21; 17:22,23; 20:17-19; Mark 10:32-34; Luke 18:31-33.) That was something they could not accept, they could not understand; that was the thing that stumbled them. But He held everything to that, as though He would say: "All this that I have been saying to you, all this that I have been holding up to view, all this for which I have chosen you, all this for which you have been in the school with Me, is based upon the cross. Not one

bit of it can be realised apart from the cross. You can come into not a fragment of it, except by way of the cross. The cross is essential to your being this Israel. You will be born out of that travail, and before that you will be scattered, every man of you."

How true it was! But out of His travail, out of His tomb, out of His resurrection, they were born as an organic entity. How they stood up together on the day of Pentecost! I do not think they had ever been together quite like that before. This is a new togetherness. They are born on the day of Pentecost. The new Israel is here. It has been spoken about and prepared for; it has had much instruction, much teaching, and much handling; but it required the cross to produce it.

So for the Israel of God the cross is essential. The cross is essential to the Kingdom, the reign; the cross is essential to the service, the administration. I am deeply impressed by something in that part of the prophecies of Isaiah from which we have taken our basic passage -- Isaiah 53:10,11. The real beginning of that chapter is, of course, not as marked in our arrangement, but at verse 13 of chapter 52: "Behold, my servant..." And then we read on about the suffering Servant. But what is said of Him immediately? "He shall be... very high." How? The next verse says: "His visage was so marred more than any man..." A few verses later we read: "He was despised, and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: we hid as it were our faces from him..." "WE did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." But we were wrong: "He was wounded for our transgressions..." And then on to our passage: "When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied."

Who is this? The Servant of the Lord. "Behold, my SERVANT". And He chose twelve who were to be "with Him" in the service of the Kingdom. They were to be the servants of the Kingdom -- His fellow-servants. You notice from the margin that some authorities add (as in Luke 6:13): "whom also he named apostles". Here, then, is the whole service of the Kingdom fully in view: but it is only, as in Isaiah 53:10,11, by the travail. It all comes out of the travail -- there is no other way. The natural disposition has to be undone by the cross, disintegrated, broken up and scattered. It is a false thing that cannot stand and will not go through; it is proved to be unsubstantial. Another thing must be brought in which is spiritual -- that is, of the Spirit -- and which can go through. The cross is the instrument of God to bring about the new Israel, the new Kingdom, and the new servants of the Kingdom.

May the Lord say something to all our hearts: show us what kind of people He is after, and why He is taking the way with us that He is. He has in view a service -- here, and more so hereafter -- which requires a people after this kind. The Lord make us like that!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/apprenticeship-for-the-kingdom-of-god/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net