

As messengers are sent out

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[0 : 00] We've come to the end of a short series on Luke chapter 5 and 6, which has been on how the Savior's kingdom grows, how it grows as he banishes sin, as he deals with disease, as he teaches the Word, as he establishes his authority.

And we're coming now to the final one, and we're going to read our passage first of all. And it's on Luke chapter 6, that's on page 862.

We're going to read verses 12 to 19, summing up what's gone before and pointing forward to the next section. So, Luke chapter 6, verse 12.

In those days Jesus went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles. Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas, the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

[1 : 24] And Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases.

And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured, and all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all.

This is the word of the Lord. Now let's pray together. Lord God, how we praise you for the breaking in of the kingdom of God, first of all in that region around the Sea of Galilee, but then, as is anticipated here, spreading out into the countryside around, and finally and eventually reaching to the ends of the earth.

Help us, as we study this passage together, help us to hear the voice of the Christ who called people not just long ago, who calls us now to follow him.

Give us open ears, give us open hearts, and give us wills which are ready to obey. We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. There are moments in the lives of individuals and in the lives of communities when there is a sense that a phase is coming to an end, and another phase is about to be introduced, times when people look back at the past and anticipate the future.

[3 : 04] And this is exactly what's happening here in this passage we've just read, Luke chapter 6, verses 12 to 19. This is the kingdom of Jesus is growing as messengers are sent out.

I want to make two points of introduction. First of all, Jesus is looking beyond his own earthly ministry here. After all, Luke is the writer who is to tell us how that story continues.

In the Acts of the Apostles, he's to tell us about the apostles, and he's to tell us at least some of the things that happened to some of the men mentioned here.

The apostles, verse 13, he chose from them 12 whom he called apostles. There's a much larger group of people here, but this group of men, these are the ones, the first ones he sends out.

And in chapter 9, he's going to send them out as his representatives, and he's going to send them out carrying his authority, the authority to act in his name.

[4 : 10] And the second thing is the context of the choosing is prayer. Verse 12, Jesus went to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.

This is to be a characteristic of the second book as well. Stephen and others are chosen in Acts chapter 6 after the apostles have prayed. In chapter 13, Barnabas and Paul are similarly chosen. And in chapter 14, Barnabas and Paul choose elders. They are thinking with the mind of the Lord, asking to choose the right people.

So that's the setting of the little passage. It's a transition to what's going to be a major block of Jesus' teaching, and it concludes the early days of Jesus' ministry.

In earlier series, we looked at how that ministry began, the public ministry on the banks of the Jordan, when John pointed to the one who is to come, the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

[5 : 12] It seems to me these two little sections are joined by the ground being prepared for the gospel to spread. And that's the way we're going to look at it.

So first of all, I'm going to call verses 12 to 16 the authentic message. Now, I'm not calling the authentic messengers, although they were authentic. I'm calling it the authentic message because the message is more important than the messengers, even if these messengers are prophets and apostles.

It's the message that matters. None of us are apostles. There are no apostles today. Yet, we have the task to share the apostolic gospel.

That is the true apostolic succession. Those who present, those who teach, those who preach, those who share the apostolic gospel. The other point is this.

[6 : 11] Those of you who are here in the earlier talks may remember in chapter 5, when the first of these men is called, and Peter and James and John, they are called to be disciples before they are apostles.

And they never cease to be disciples. That is the point. And in verse 13, he called his disciples and chose from them 12. Before we can do anything else in the Lord's work, we have to be called to be his disciples.

We are not apostles. We are not called to be apostles. But we are called to be disciples. I think that's what runs through the whole of this story.

Many others who are not apostles then or now are going to share in that message of bringing Christ to people. So, first of all, a word about the term apostle.

Now, these 12 men are unique. Some of them would become channels of revelation as they write books, which are going to form part of the New Testament, and which together with the prophets, which is one of the New Testament terms for the whole of the Old Testament, is going to be the final and authoritative revelation.

[7 : 33] The words of the apostles, the words of the prophets, these together are going to be God's final revelation to the world. As the letter to the Hebrews, whose author is anonymous, is to say this word is to express fully the living word.

God who spoke through the prophets, God who spoke through the apostles, uses these men to point to the living word. Now, Peter heads the list.

But that does not mean that Peter is in any sense a super apostle. Those of you who know 1-2 Corinthians will know how the apostle Paul's life and ministry was plagued by those who regarded themselves as super apostles.

Special revelation, special talent, special people who were on a higher level than the rest of the people of God. And it's very interesting.

Peter, in his second letter, talks to new converts who have a faith as precious as ours. That's something you need always to remember.

[8 : 40] The newest believer, the humblest believer, has a faith which is as precious as the apostles. And it's therefore I come back to that point I made. It is the message, not the messenger.

Peter, as I say, is no sense a super apostle. He is a natural leader. We always need leaders, of course. But he is not uniquely special.

Then we have James and John. And in a sense, they span the whole apostolic age between them. Because in Acts chapter 12, James is to be martyred by Herod.

And before, really, he can carry out any significant ministry. Whereas John, his brother, almost certainly lives longer than any of the other apostles, living on to the 80s and 90s of the first century. The author of the fourth gospel, the author of the three letters bearing his name, and the author of the book of Revelation. So we have here one of the mysteries of God's providence, two brothers chosen, one of them martyred almost immediately, the other one, probably the last person or one of the last people on earth who had known the Lord Jesus during his earthly ministry.

[9 : 57] Then we have Matthew, of course, or Levi, whose call we looked at a few weeks ago in chapter 5. And fascinatingly, in the same group, we have this man called Simon the Zealot.

The Zealots were guerrilla fighters, hated the Romans, hated the occupying power. Simon would naturally have hated Matthew as a tool of the occupying power.

If Simon the Zealot had met Matthew before he had met Jesus, almost certainly Matthew would have a dagger in his ribs. Transforming power of the gospel.

And Judas, who became a traitor. Now there's another great mystery of God's providence. Judas chosen to play that dastardly part, but Judas is responsible for his actions.

We cannot say that because Judas is the man of perdition, as John calls him, that he had no choice.

[11:00] Judas could have chosen differently. And that's important. Everyone does God's will in the long run. So as C.S. Lewis said, it makes a huge difference whether we do God's will in the way that John did or in the way that Judas did.

That says he, both of them carry out God's will. God's overall will. Nevertheless, it is, it's Judas who becomes the traitor.

And even the phrase, who became a traitor, shows the choice for Judas. The second thing, I've mentioned this earlier, they did not cease to be disciples in becoming apostles.

I think we need to remember that. Whatever we do for the Lord, whatever task we may do, whatever place we may have in his church, we never cease to be disciples.

See, we give allegiance to the gospel they taught. But they gave allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the gospel word that they wrote, which is authoritative.

[12:11] It doesn't mean that they were perfect in themselves. It doesn't mean that they were flawless. Of course they weren't. It is the message, not the messenger. We need to remember this in our evangelical celebrity culture.

How often, how often you hear people quoting the most ordinary observation from some guru they admire? The kind of thing all sorts of people say. The kind of thing we don't need gurus to tell us. As if it gives a special, as if it gives a special sanctity or a special point to the words. Disciples before apostles. And the other point is there were 12 of them.

And that's a deliberate reflection of the tribes of Israel. The one people of God. When you come to the book of Revelation, the 12 tribes, the 12 apostles are the foundations of the heavenly city. Just as the 12 tribes were gathered under the authority of the words of Moses, which were the words of God. So the people of God are gathered under the authority of the words of the apostles and the prophets.

[13:24] One people of God. One gospel. One Bible. One Lord. The authentic message. And this Lord, as we've seen, is Lord of the Sabbath.

We saw that last week. It means he's Lord of time. Lord of creation. This Lord is the conqueror of sin. Shortly, in later chapters, he's to be the conqueror of death.

The conqueror of disease. The word himself. That's how this section begins in chapter 5 with the hearing of the word of God. So the authentic message, first of all.

And then in verses 17 to 19, we have another glimpse of the authentic Lord, the Lord of the apostles. Verse 17, Jesus came down with them.

Now them here are very plainly the apostles. Because there are many disciples there. He came down a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people.

[14:28] There are three groups here. The apostles stand with him as he turns now to teaching. The next section, beginning in verse 20, is going to be a big teaching block.

He stood, we are told, on a level place, a plateau. Although people debate the relationship of this teaching with the longer teaching of Matthew, the so-called Sermon on the Mount, since the level place can mean plateau.

It could be the same, another version of the same sermon. Or Jesus, an itinerant teacher, obviously would repeat messages with slight differences in different places.

There's not a problem in either case. I mean, the point is, whether it's exactly the same incident or not, this is the kind of teaching that the Lord is giving, the kind of teaching the Son of Man is giving.

I want you to notice two things here. First of all, the emphasis that the age of the Messiah has come. Remember back in chapter 3, the Baptist says, the Baptist said, I baptize with water.

[15:41] But the one who comes will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And we notice then, that's not two elements, not the Holy Spirit and fire, but the Holy Spirit who is fire, the Holy Spirit who is God, the living presence of God.

And the fact that people are healed of diseases, unclean spirits cast out, is a sign that the servant of the Lord prophesied by Isaiah has arrived.

Because Isaiah says, when the servant of the Lord comes, the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will walk, evil will be banished.

This is already happening in the earthly ministry of Jesus, but it's also an anticipation of the new creation. That in the earthly life of Jesus, many were healed, many were not.

And cemeteries didn't empty. Three people were raised from the dead. But don't forget that these people would die again. They weren't raised to the life immortal, for as a miracle showing the power of Jesus over death, they were allowed to return to this mortal life for a time.

[16:56] Now, these miracles are unique. They belong to the age of the Messiah. As we notice, they are complete. Jesus never said to somebody, come back in six months or a checkup.

These were complete miracles. And so they are anticipating the new creation. The new creation will be no disease, no death. Sin will be banished. And the Messiah will reign in glory and love throughout the whole world.

So you see how that is summing up the previous chapters, from chapters three and following. Once again, this is general incident here.

And the other thing to notice, they came from Judea and Jerusalem and the sea coast of Tyre and Sidon. People are coming from outside Israel. And that's going to be Luke's preoccupation in his next book.

Luke. You see, think about the situation after Jesus' resurrection. The disciples had seen his miracles.

[18:02] They had heard his teaching. They knew the age of the Messiah had come. And they obviously believed after his resurrection it must have fully come.

And the question they asked, a natural question, you think of it, people brought up to read and understand and studied it in the scripture, said, Lord, are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

Is this going to happen now? It's interesting how the Lord replies. He doesn't say you're talking nonsense. What he effectively says is your vision isn't big enough.

It is going to happen. But it's going to be a far, far bigger thing than you ever anticipated. You are going to receive power. The Holy Spirit is going to enable you to carry the message, Judea, Jerusalem, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

But the times and seasons are not in your hand. All the time between his going to heaven and his coming again, that kingdom will grow.

[19:05] But it will only finally be realized when he returns again and sets up his kingdom. But the point is, these are real pictures of the kingdom to come.

When I say they're token miracles, I don't mean they're gestures. What I mean is they are signs, miracles of the new creation, which show us what he will one day do on a universal scale.

The life of the world to come. And the second thing I want you to notice is the emphasis on teaching. Verse 18, who came to hear him.

They didn't just come to be healed. They came to listen to his teaching. Now, all through chapters 3 up to this point, the emphasis has been on teaching both in synagogues and in the open air.

And this is going to continue. At the beginning of chapter 5, we are told the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God.

[20:08] And now again, they come to hear him. And in verse 20, as I see, he's going on to this great block of teaching with a version of what we call the Beatitudes.

This is the living word, the Savior, who is to save his people from their sins. Once again, coming back to Luke's second book.

This is the way that the kingdom is going to spread. It's going to spread as the words of life are spoken. It's going to spread as people preach, teach, and share this gospel.

And it's something that begins with the apostles, particularly, as I say, some of them commit this to writing. All kinds of people, known and unknown, are going to go to the ends of the earth.

They are going to take this message of the Savior, the living word made flesh. Now, at this moment, it seems this all seems very distant.

[21:15] And verse 19, all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him, and he healed them all. Now, that healing power has been very obvious.

But let us never forget the greatest miracle of all. The greatest power of all is the power of the living word, the gospel, which is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

Ultimately, that is a greater miracle than healing the sick. That is a greater miracle than stilling the storm. The living word, the word that spoke creation, speaks into the deadness and darkness of a human life and brings life where there was death, brings light where there was darkness. And when Paul is going to talk about this later, he's going to say the miracle of conversion is like the miracle of creation. God, who commended the light to shine out of darkness, has commended the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, shine into our hearts so that we might be saved. So you see, what we are, as the gospel spreads, we're not looking for healing services. We're not looking for spectacular miracles.

[22 : 42] What we are looking for is the power of God, the living word of God, bringing life out of death. And as throughout the Acts of the Apostles and throughout the rest of the story, as the Apostles and then others spread this, this continues.

And indeed, it continues into our own day and will continue in every subsequent generation until the Lord returns. Father who sent the Son, the Father, the Son who is revealed by the Spirit, will continue this ministry until the work on earth is done.

Amen. Let's pray. God, our Father, we praise you that in our day and generation, thousands of years after these words were spoken, these events happened in a place far remote from the Sea of Galilee, that living word is still reaching out.

That word is still converting, challenging. That word is still causing people to grow in grace. Give us confidence in the life-giving power of the gospel.

Give us confidence in the apostolic message. Help us to proclaim it and to believe in it. In Jesus' name. Amen.