I wonder how many of you have experienced that feeling I have in reading the New Testament, the feeling that so many of the stories are not finished. Certain characters appear on the pages of the Scripture for only a brief instant and then vanish into oblivion. We catch tiny snatches of events through casual references, but the intriguing stories are sometimes never finished. For example, you all remember the story of the rich young ruler who came to our Lord and asked Him what he must do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus answering him said, “thou knowest the commandments.” And the ruler replied, “these have I kept from my youth up.” Then Jesus said, “there is still something which you lack. Sell all your goods and give to the poor; then you will have treasure in heaven.” We are told that the young ruler became very sad when he heard this, for his wealth was great. But we are not told what the young man did. Was his love for his money too great to let him follow Jesus, or did he obey the command and put his trust in heavenly treasures? Here was a good man, eager for the truth of the Spirit; we cannot help but feel a profound sympathy for him in his problem - but we are left in the dark as to his decision, and can only guess the results. And what happened to that man called Simon of Cyrene, the man who carried the cross for Jesus up the hill called Golgotha? How did this experience affect him? Tradition has it that he became a leader in the early church, but the Gospels leave us in the dark as to his fate.

There is no need to cite more examples - they are all too familiar to require mention. As we read the Bible, we find many brief references that are never completed, and in order to make them complete we must rely upon our wits and imagination to read between the lines and to fit the tiny pieces together into an intelligible whole. When we come to examine the lives of the disciples, we run squarely into this problem. The few references we have do not give us a clear picture of the nature of these men. Some of them are merely mentioned by name. And yet it is important to know just what kind of men these disciples were who were to become the intimate companions of our Lord for these men formed the springboard for the early Christian movement. To get a picture of them, we must examine carefully, even the casual references to them; and as we do so, we find them emerging as individuals.

What kind of men did Jesus choose? What were their qualifications? Let us pretend that we here, all of us, form a nominating committee to examine the candidates for Jesus’ discipleships. We will examine the qualifications of each very carefully, bring up everything we know about them and see if we can discover what kind of men Jesus wanted with Him. It’s always fun to be on a committee of the sort, one which investigates people and digs up all sorts of information that the candidates would just as soon leave hidden.

As we look them over, they don’t seem to be a particularly impressive looking lot. They all look like fishermen, hard workers; and I don’t think any of them has been to a theological school. There is one, though, who doesn’t look like the others. He is very well dressed and looks as if he
has a lot of money. His name is Matthew. Let’s see about his qualifications. His past experience? Present occupation? Why he’s one of those publicans, one of those tax collectors for the Romans, who pays the government a certain amount for the privilege of collecting taxes from the Jews. And if he doesn’t get enough to suit him, he invents new taxes. He doesn’t seem a likely candidate. No one would accept him. He is disowned by the Jews, and is just an ancient Quisling for the Roman rulers. He’s probably a good businessman, and knows how to make money, but hardly a fit companion for Jesus.

Let’s examine another. There’s one here who is quite a mathematician, one of those matter of fact men who know what everything costs. He’s the sort of fellow you can depend upon to figure out what the Sunday school picnic will cost. He can estimate how much bread it will take to feed a multitude if no one eats too much, with just a little figuring. Philip is his name. A good practical man, but with absolutely no imagination and very little faith. Do you think he will qualify?

Here’s another fellow almost like him. He’s a sort of Palestinian man from Missouri. He won’t believe a thing unless he’s shown that it’s true. He believes seeing is believing, and he doesn’t see too well. He’s a moody, gloomy sort of fellow too; always pessimistic and sure he will meet misfortunes. He is a pretty dogged chap, once he gets hold of an idea, but it seems that he might be capable of doubting even the Master. Will Thomas do as a disciple?

There’s another fellow, older than the rest, who is candidating. Getting bald now-only a few patches of hair left clinging like reluctant patches of snow after a spring thaw. His age is against him, of course. If we want a doctor, we want one with lots of experience; if we need a lawyer, we want one who has won lots of cases and maybe knows a few judges; but if we want someone in the church, he must be young, the younger the better. This fellow may have old-fashioned ideas. Aside from this, they say he’s an awful tightwad - objects to spending a penny. He’d be a good one to hold the funds, but he would be sure to object to spending anything; if someone wanted to honor Jesus by pouring perfume over him, Judas would probably say “That might have been sold for a good price”. I don’t know that we can trust Judas.

There is a pair from the same family, John and James, the sons of Zebedee. They’re likely looking candidates-fishermen, if you will, but very successful ones. They have the best boat on the lake, and always know where the fish are biting. They’re an ambitious pair. Did you notice their nicknames? They’re called the sons of thunder, and no wonder. They aren’t at all backward about tooting their own horns. If we choose them they would want to be promised seats at the right hand of God.

We aren’t doing so well so far. Let’s try another. There is one here called Simon the Zealot. He might qualify if he weren’t so fiery tempered. But these zealots are fanatic patriots; they can’t stand the sight of Romans in Judea. This Simon is sure to cause trouble; he’d be likely to chop someone’s ear off if he became angry. Hardly a fit companion for Jesus.

There are some others to examine, Peter and Andrew, Nathaniel, Thaddaeus and another James. Good men in their way, but they all have their faults. None of them is outstanding really; they’re
just a group of ordinary fishermen after all. If it were our duty to nominate these candidates, we would probably want to look around for more promising ones. These do not seem fit company for our Lord. Instead of being perfect God-like men, following the will of God in all that they do, they seem to be the ordinary run-of-the-mill kind of men that you would find anywhere. They are like you and me; they have their good points, but they are certainly far from perfect, far, far below the example of Jesus.

2

These were the kind of men the disciples were. Imperfect, ordinary, openly sinners in the sight of God. We would hardly choose them as disciples, but the important point is this: Jesus did. He did not look around the land for the Doctors of Divinity, the Pharisees, nor did he hunt up the pious mystics and the saints. He chose the imperfect ones, the sinners, the very ones that would seem unqualified, the publicans and sinners, for these had need of the message of Jesus. Their souls were thirsting for the water he might give them.

Think what this great act means to us today. If Jesus himself chose the ordinary man to be his intimate companion, then there is hope for us, for you and me. Just as Matthew and Thomas could find room in the all embracing love of Jesus, so can we today turn to Jesus and know that He will receive us, even as the father of the lost son received him. For this is one of the great teachings of Jesus, that all men are worthy of good. The kingdom of God does not work on a merit system. Each individual life is sacred in the sight of God.

The early enemies of Christianity criticized the religion for the very reason that it drew to itself the lowly, and humble, the uneducated and outcast. But Jesus taught blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. He was the champion of the common men, and knew they had the potentialities for greatness if only given a chance. The story is told that when the founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth, first outlined his plans to interested churchmen, he was discouraged in his ambitions. “Your plans are very fine”, he was told; “there is a crying need for the reforms you anticipate. Those who need the church most never get to it; the church must come to them. But ministers cannot leave churches for that; who will do the work?” And William Booth pointed to the throngs crowding the pubs in the London slums and said “These will be my ministers when they have been made men through the help of Christ”. And it is through men like these that the Salvation Army was built. William Booth had learned the lesson that Jesus taught long ago. All men are valuable in the sight of God; even those who have become degraded can find hope in Christ, for he calls even the sinners to be with him.

One of the greatest tragedies that comes with war is the destruction of this ideal of the sacredness of all human life. The title of a recent bestseller puts the new attitude quite succinctly, the title which states, ” They Were Expendable”. This idea strikes an unpleasant chord in our minds as we think of it not so much because the soldiers described had to be sacrificed for the sake of the large body of their comrades, but because in the necessities of war men must be used as pawns on a chess board, and treated as we treat inanimate objects. Forced by grim necessity we forget the value of these lives and become callous to the fearful carnage going on. Our magazines and
newspapers and motion pictures are doing us service through their pictures and stories of the war to get us used to what war means in terms of death and destruction.

It does not take long, however, for the initial horror to wear off and be replaced by a resigned callousness that life is pretty cheap after all. This is a natural attitude to take because it is a reflex mechanism in the face of an unpleasant prospect. But it is a dangerous attitude, for it enables us to view calmly the slaughter of innocents, and serves to make us forget our moral responsibilities to do all in our power to change the conditions which breed wars so that these men do not die in vain. We cannot be indifferent to our responsibilities; and it is our responsibility to keep alive the ideals so many are dying for, the right for all men to be free in the sight of God.

There was once a Chinese convert to Christianity, whose name was Lo. As he was studying the Bible one day he came across that great verse at the end of the Gospel of Matthew and read, “lo I am with you alway”. Lo got a great deal of comfort out of this verse and he thought it strange and wonderful that Jesus knew his name and was speaking to him personally. We can smile at Lo’s simple faith, but when we think about it, we must admit that Lo was right. Jesus was speaking to him personally, just as he speaks with all of men, and says, “come, follow me”. Every life is precious in the sight of God, and the message of Jesus is directed to all of us.

Jesus knew the depths and heights in the soul and mind of man. He knew the potentialities that every man holds locked in the secret chambers of his heart. And Jesus gives us the key to unlock these abilities, the vision to raise our eyes from the dust to the stars. So far as the world is concerned - “full many a gem of purest ray serene the dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear: full many a flower is born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness on the desert air”. But for Jesus, no man is unseen in the eyes of the eternal, and he tells each and every one of us, as he told his disciples “I am with you always”.

It is inspiring to learn as we study the lives of the disciples that Jesus wanted the ordinary man with him, that he considered all men valuable in the sight of God. But more important to learn is what the companionship of Christ meant to the people who knew him. One cannot read the pages of the New Testament and not feel the tremendous influence which Jesus exerted on the lives of those about him. Through his spirit, these ordinary men became surcharged with the power of God, which completely transformed the direction and meaning of their lives. They became new men as all their energies were focused by the power of Jesus and swept toward God. The tremendous power of Jesus seized them and in spite of their past weaknesses made them fit to be called the sons of God. As the wind seizes the sails of a ship and sweeps it onward, so the mighty power of the Spirit transformed these men and carried them in the path of Jesus.

When that great evangelist Moody was holding a series of meetings in London, a young medical student attracted by the crowd entered the hall out of curiosity. But when he left his life had been changed; for the first time he understood the summons of Christ and was ready to follow Him. A few days later, one of his fellow students smilingly questioned him on his changed attitude. “I understand you got religion the other night”, he sneered. “No, my friend,” the young man replied, “I didn’t get religion; religion got me.” Religion, the power of God, did get this young man, and surcharged him with a spirit that carried him on to a great life of service to mankind.
For this young man was to become the famous Dr. Grenfell whose work in Labrador is a living proof of the power of the Spirit.

When Jesus was crucified, it looked as if the disturbances stirred up by him were at an end. What movement can continue when its leader has been put out of the way? But the cross, the symbol for defeat, became the symbol of triumph for the Spirit of Christ lived on in the lives of his disciples enabling to spread the teachings of Jesus and establish the tiny societies which became our Christian Church. All their energies became God directed in the common aim to show their conviction that Jesus was not dead.

How does this Spirit work in man? The operation of an electromagnet furnishes a helpful illustration. An electromagnet consists of a core of soft iron around which is a coil of insulated wire. As electrical power flows through the wire, the iron becomes a powerful magnet. The secret of this new power lies in the fact that the current so influences the arrangement of the molecules that they point all in the same direction, while without the current they point in different directions. Only as the countless molecules point in one direction does the iron gain the power of the magnet, and it is the electrical power which creates this unity.

So our lives gain the power of the Spirit when through the influence of Christ our lives become focused and point in one direction, toward God. A great thinker once said “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” As all our energies and thoughts point toward God, then the power of the Spirit may flow through our lives and we become new creatures, transformed by the surging power which comes from God.

This is the message of the Lenten season which we find as we study the influence of Jesus. God cares for all men, even those who are imperfect and through the Spirit of His Son we become transformed and made worthy to be called the Sons of God.