

## **“The Twelve Disciples”**

### ***John: The Beloved***

“Now there was leaning on Jesus’ bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved.” (Jn 13:23)

Leonardo da Vinci in his painting “The Last Supper” pictures John as a rather effeminate looking young man, but his is not at all the picture I have of the apostle name John. The name “John” or “Jonas” was a common name of the time and corresponds to the Hebrew name Jonah. The name “John” means “the Lord is gracious” or “Grace of the Lord.” Although John’s name speaks of the grace of God he was not very gracious in his early years. Dr. W.T Conner used to say, “If you disagreed with Paul, he would argue with all day; but if you disagreed with John he would simply look at you with eyes blazing and say ‘You’re a liar and the truth is not in you.’”

The Apostle John should be familiar to every Christian because he wrote so much of the New Testament – he wrote at least five books (Gospel of John, the letters of I, II, III John and the book of Revelation).

He is one of the sons of Zebedee (a Galilean fisherman) and Salome, who some say was the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

When we first meet John he is a disciple of John the Baptist. When John identified Jesus as “the Lamb of God” who has come to take away the sins of the world, (Jn 1:35-37) John left to follow Jesus.

As we have noted previous John was a member of the Lord’s most intimate inner circle. He was the younger brother of James and almost everything that we observed about the personality and character of James is also true of John. He was passionate, zealous, and personally ambitious. They were struck from the same mold. The two brothers had similar temperaments and it should be remembered that the nickname “*sons of thunder*” given to them by Jesus applied to both men. John was present and equally ready to call down fire from Heaven upon the inhospitable Samaritans (Luke 9:51-56). It seems all the more remarkable that John became known as “*the apostle of love*.” The love that will later be the mark of his life was not something that came naturally to John but rather was learned from Jesus. There was obviously a remarkable transformation for he wrote more than any other Apostle about the importance of love. The difference was that John aged well. He is an outstanding example of what can happen if we allow Christ to remake us in his image, allowing his strength to be made perfect in our weaknesses.

Three remarkable things about John:

*The First thing remarkable about John was He Had A Place of Special Intimacy.*

Surely the most beautiful description of anyone is the one given of John as “the one whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23). Five times in Scripture we read this description of John (John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 20). In four of those passages the word “love” is *agape* and in the fifth (20:2) the word is *philos*.

The literal rendering of this would be “*the one whom Jesus kept on loving.*” I don’t think this is pride or boasting on John’s part, I think the fact that Jesus loved him, as he much as he did, just as he was, was a fact the never got over.

As Charles Wesley penned in one of his many hymns of the faith, “Caesar’s title less my envy moves than to be styled the man whom Jesus loved.”

One of the public demonstrations of the intimacy that existed between Jesus and John was seen at the cross. Concerned over the care of his mother (John 21:25-27), Jesus committed her into the care of John. We cannot help but wonder why Jesus did not place the care of his mother in the hands of one of her other sons. Jesus could not have demonstrated in any more tangible way his trust of John than his willingness to commit the care of his mother into his hands.

*The Second Thing Remarkable About John was His Capacity for Spiritual Things.*

While it is obvious that the Lord never played favorites, He found in John a deep capacity for spiritual things. This capacity is seen in the fact that he is the first to believe when presented with the fact of the resurrection (John 20:8) and he was the first to discern that it was Jesus who was with them at the seaside after the resurrection (John 21:7).

*The Third Thing Remarkable About John was The Changes that Made It Possible For Him To Finish Well.*

John may have had a rough beginning as one of “*sons of thunder*” – zealous, intolerant, and ambitious, but age and grace have tempered him.

It is probable that after the death of Mary, who he had cared for the remainder of her earthly life, that he set himself wholly to the task of the spread of the gospel. Church history seems to attest to the fact that John became the pastor of the church that the apostle Paul founded in the city of Ephesus. When Domitian became the emperor of Rome, he instituted a great persecution of the church and as a result had John seized and banished to the isle of Patmos. It needs to be remembered that by this time John is ninety years of age.

It is worth considering that Moses was eighty years old when he was called upon to lead the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. It is only when John, who is now ninety years of age, and an exile on the isle of Patmos, that he found himself “in the spirit on the Lord’s day.” (Rev. 1:10). To John it was committed to reveal the future of Christ’s kingdom. Far from being through with John when he was ninety years of age, he still had much for him to do. As Elder

Cumming has written, "...but God had to wait till John was a very old man, almost done with this world, before He could trust him with such a charge." [As quoted by Herbert Lockyer. All the Apostles of the Bible. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) p. 98]

When his imprisonment ended, most are agreed that he again returned to Ephesus. It is there by most accounts that John died around A.D. 98 at the age of 100. "Jerome says in his commentary on Galatians that the aged apostle John was so frail in his final days at Ephesus that he had to be carried into the church. One phrase was constantly on his lips; "My little children, love one another." Asked why he always said this, he replied, 'It is the Lord's command, and if this alone is done, it is enough.'" [John MacArthur. Twelve Ordinary Men. (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2002) p. 117]

His brother, James, was the first of the Apostles to die, John, on the other hand, was the last to die.

John's life is a wonderful example and from him we can learn:

- To Finish Well John learned to balance a love for the truth with tolerance.

I almost hate to even use the word tolerance because of its abuse today. In American society Christians are told that they need to be more tolerant, when they say that they mean that we have to accept whatever junk the world puts out with a smile of acceptance. But that just is not so, my friends. The problem here with John was that he was one of those individuals that everything was either black or white, there was very little room for gray area with John. With John if you were not a part of his group you were just wrong. We see this character trait displayed in Mark 9: 38-41. "Now John answered Him, saying, "Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us." (39) But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. (40) "For he who is not against us is on our side. (41)"For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward."

In this incident, as in the incident of wanting to call down fire from heaven, John displayed an appalling intolerance for any one outside his own group, whether they were doing the right thing or not. In this incident he forbade this man to minister in Jesus' name, not because he was doing wrong, but because he was not an official member of their group. As John MacArthur points out, "It is wonderful to have a regard for the truth, but zeal for the truth must be balanced by a love for people, or it can give way to judgmentalism, harshness and a lack of compassion." [John MacArthur. "Twelve Ordinary Men." (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2002) p. 100]

Earlier in this passage in Mark (9:33-37) Jesus had been teaching about the motive of service – love, and who would be counted the greatest among them, for Jesus knew they had been arguing about this. The words of Jesus must have convicted the heart of John for he now

tells the story of how he had stepped in and stopped this man's ministry because he was not one of their group. I believe John told this story as a confession because he had been convicted by the words of Jesus. This seems to be a major turning point in John's life when he sees the need to balance his love for the truth with love for people. This rebuke was a crucial in moving toward becoming "the apostle of Love."

Before leaving this point it should be pointed out that some people are just as imbalanced as John but in the opposite direction. They talk and think about nothing but "love." But without truth one is left with error covered by shallow sentimentality. Those who harp so much on tolerance, are themselves the most intolerant of people. They love tolerance only if they are on the receiving end of the bargain. They are totally unwilling to exercise tolerance when it is applied that hold to conservative Christian belief. You are free to believe whatever you desire as long as it is not a faith based on the Bible. And all you can call that is hypocrisy!

John became more tolerant but he never compromised his belief in the truth.

In (2 John 7-11) he is still standing for the truth. "For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. (8) Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward. (9) Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.

(10) If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; (11) for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds."

He is no longer calling down fire from heaven on the heads of those who oppose the truth, but he still advises believers not to open their homes or to bestow a blessing on those who make a living twisting the truth.

*To Finish Well he learned to balance love for the truth with tolerance and ...*

· To Finish Well John learned to balance humility and ambition.

John became a man of great humility but he was not always so. In his youth he was a very ambitious young man. You will remember the incident recorded in Mark 10:35-45 where James and John, through their mother, ask Jesus for position of power and prominence among the disciples. In verse thirty-five, "They said to Him, "Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory." There is nothing fundamentally wrong with asking to sit next to Jesus in the kingdom. Any believer would desire to do that! The other disciples obviously also desired it and that is why they were so angry (Mark 9:41) when they found out that James and John had beat them to the punch. As John MacArthur says, "Their error was in desiring to obtain the position more than they desired to be worthy of it." [MacArthur. p. 109]

There is an amazing transformation in John as he matures as a believer; he becomes one of the most humble of all the apostles. Not once in John's gospel account does he ever mention himself by name. When he does speak of himself he speaks of himself in relation to Jesus, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Far from being a boast I believe that it is a reference to a fact that John never got over, "*Jesus, loves me, even me!*" In the book of Revelation he refers to himself not as the last living apostle, which he was, but as "your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ," (Rev 1:9) Some where in the intervening years John found balance between ambition and humility.

So what can we learn from the life of John the Beloved? Let me leave you with just a few truths.

1. No matter how unworthy and rough around the edges our lives may be, if we will turn them over to Jesus he will make something remarkable and enduring of them.
2. The truth that Jesus loves us even as we are is a truth that we should never get over.
3. No matter how old we may be God can use us to accomplish great things.