

You know the end of my life story, most probably, but I ask your indulgence to hear another part. My story up to mid-way through Jesus' ministry. At that point, I was still his friend.

Mine was a common name during my lifetime. Think of two original twelve apostles, Jude Thomas or Jude Thaddaeus, or even Jude the brother of Jesus.

I was the outsider of the Twelve. From the beginning. I dressed differently, talked differently, and thought differently. Although the Gospel writers don't talk of my interactions in the group, you can guess that I didn't have any close friends among the apostles, and when I struggled, nobody to confide in.

I was very skilled with money and was chosen to be the treasurer of our group, even though Matthew was known to be extremely talented in that area. The Bible doesn't say when, where or how I became a disciple. You do know it was early in the ministry of Jesus because he believed I could be a fisher of men.

I was as dedicated as any of the other apostles those first couple of years. I wasn't outspoken, but neither were six of the other apostles that you know little about. I was sent out as a pair with the other twelve, and then as a pair with the seventy. I saw Jesus do miracles and healings, and heard all his teachings. I did miracles and healings. For the first couple of years, you would not have been able to distinguish my ministry from the other eleven. Jesus did not distinguish me from them either. He loved me as much as them.

I am Judas the son of Simon Iscariot. Scholars of your day have concluded that my father's name meant that we came from Keriath, a town about 10 miles south of Hebron, or about 30 miles south of Jerusalem. Those scholars have concluded that I was probably the only one of the twelve apostles who was not from Galilee.

One Sabbath, we apostles went with Jesus to eat at the home of a prominent Pharisee. We were relegated to the cheap seats at the back of the room, but Jesus was seated near the front. As often happened, the Pharisees were trying to find a way to disparage him. A man who was an obvious leper came to stand before Jesus. He had some abnormal swelling and it was apparent to everyone in the room he needed healing. Rather than being caught in a trap, Jesus set his own by asking, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

What a question! The Pharisees and experts of the law knew the spirit of the law encouraged such an action, but their man-made rules prohibited such a thing. They were caught in a trap of their own making and had no out. They could do nothing except remain silent, even after Jesus

healed the man. Oh, the uncomfortable silence, everyone hoped Jesus would change the subject. Until Jesus changed the subject.

He looked around the room and made the observation that everyone had been scrambling to get seats of honor. Imagine the red faces because they had been doing just that. Jesus pointed out that it was a smarter strategy to take a lower seat, and then receive a special honor if the host moved you to the front. Eliminated the risk of being embarrassed in case the host asked you to take a lower seat. I'm sure that was embarrassing to all the guests in the room, but it was more embarrassing when they later realized he wasn't talking about seating at a dinner, but being humble in relationship to God.

Jesus then looked at his host and told him that he was not righteous when he invited friends and family to a dinner, because they could just pay him back. But it was righteous to invite those who were not able to pay him back. Must have been a shock to the host and all of the guests. Looking around, the only poor people in the room were Jesus and us— his apostles! I doubt anybody in the room had ever purposely invited a poor person to a dinner, except for a few relatives. Maybe. It was in situations like those that I began to be uncomfortable. Jesus not only insulted his host twice, but also insulted all the guests in the room.

I wanted respect from the religious leaders, always did. But I also always hoped for some financial support from them, too. Jesus never seemed concerned about money. In retrospect, I guess if you already own the whole universe, there isn't much on earth that you need. Consider that in your own life. If you are truly the sons and daughters of God, what is there on earth that you don't already own?

Back to the dinner at the Pharisee's house. There I was in the cheap seats squirming in embarrassment when one of the people near Jesus tried to change the subject again. The man said, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." That comment probably doesn't mean much to you, but it did to us in the room.

We were all Jews. We had all been brought up with the notion that only Jews would be saved when the Messiah came. We did not have a well-developed notion of what Heaven was or how you got there, but we were all certain that the Jews had exclusive claim to the benefits that would occur when the Messiah came. We were all certain that was true, especially the religious leaders of the Jews. We were all certain, except Jesus.

Jesus wanted everyone to know that the kingdom wasn't coming on their terms, but on God's terms...and Jesus had been announcing those terms. Those who weren't willing to accept Jesus' terms were going to disinvite themselves from the feast, while those who were willing to accept the terms would enjoy it. The parable Jesus told clearly showed the religious leaders as disinviting themselves, while the obviously unclean people would get to enjoy the banquet. The man's comment had been right, the ones eating at the feast were blessed, but he misunderstood who those people would be.

Needless to say, the banquet ended on a sour note, and we were not given any gifts or support. As treasurer, I was quite disappointed that Jesus not only didn't raise any money that night, but he had antagonized people that could have made our lives much better. I should have known it was only going to get worse from there.

Not long after that, large crowds were following us everywhere we went. It would have been a simple thing for the Lord to give a little uplifting message, and then pass the hat for some contributions from the crowd. Instead of doing that, Jesus raised his voice and said quite the opposite: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brother and sister ... and their own life, such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." I can assure you that that is not the kind of message that is encouraging for a treasurer hoping to get more money.

Your modern-day translators and preachers can waltz around all they want, but Jesus said "hate" and that is exactly what he meant. He meant that you not only had to be willing to do without those people and things in your life, but that you counted them as your enemies. Furthermore, he wanted you to become willing to give up your life, literally, in order to become his disciple. You can be assured that many of the crowd left before he could tell his next parable.

The parable Jesus told next is my favorite because of its simplicity and obviousness. As with many of his parables, Jesus had seen something we had all seen, but had understood its deeper meaning. We had all seen buildings which were abandoned before they were finished, but never thought anything about them. Jesus understood them in a different way.

He said, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower." He finished that sentence and looked around, nodding at a partial structure in the distance. Not many of us had wanted to build a tower, but many of us wanted to build houses.

"Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to finish? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish the building, everyone who sees it will laugh at you. They will say, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'" From his past lessons, we apostles knew Jesus wasn't talking about buildings.

I can't prove it, but when Jesus said that last sentence, I believe he looked right into my eyes, right into my soul. Maybe that was the first time I realized I was not willing to give up everything to be his disciple. And if I wasn't willing to give up everything, I probably wasn't willing to give up very much. He made me count the cost of being his disciple, and I decided that I wasn't willing to pay the price.

That was the day my doubts began. I recalled Jesus saying, "Whoever is not with me is against me."¹ Now that I knew I was not wholeheartedly for him, I started finding little ways to be

¹ Matthew 12:30

against him. At first, I just discounted some of the things he said. I quit praying as much, then not at all. I quit listening with attention. I wanted to raise as much money as I could, (long pause) so I could..... steal more. If he said I was his enemy, I would prove that I was.

You want to be a friend of Jesus? How much are you willing to give up? Or not willing, as the case may be. You can't do that, you can't be unwilling to give it all up, Jesus said that. Maybe you should quit trying to do what Jesus says you cannot do. You are either his friend or his enemy. And, from my own example, you don't want to become his enemy.