JESUS CALLS THE TWELVE APOSTLES

Luke 6:1–16

Key Verse: 6:13

“And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles…”

How do you handle criticism? Some would say, “It depends.” There’s healthy criticism, when we get feedback from those who want us to improve. Then there’s unhealthy criticism, when the point is just to knock us down and crush us. When we’re criticized, our immediate response tends to be defensive. Sometimes we get angry or depressed. It’s especially hard when the criticism is relentless. In today’s passage Jesus faces intense scrutiny and criticism, it’s not healthy at all, yet he handles it so well. We want to think in this passage especially about how and why he prays all night, what direction he finds, and what it means to us today. May God speak to us through his living words.

As we’ve seen, Jesus began his ministry after receiving baptism from John and resisting the devil’s temptations. When he did, God filled him with his Spirit. He quoted from Isaiah’s prophecy, saying God had anointed him to preach good news to the poor. He said he came to proclaim “the year of the Lord’s favor,” the year of Jubilee, showing how God longs to restore his people. It was so gracious. But from the start his gracious ministry was met with opposition. His hometown people saw him from a human point of view and got so angry they tried to kill him. Despite this, Jesus went on to teach the word of God. His word possessed authority to drive out unclean spirits from people. He also healed those with various diseases by laying his hands on every one of them. He worked late into the night and went visiting people diligently with his message. His powerful teaching and compassionate healing proved God had sent him to proclaim the good news of his kingdom. While teaching and healing, he called disciples like Simon Peter and Levi the tax collector. He even touched a man with leprosy and proclaimed God’s forgiveness to a paralytic. His popularity attracted the attention of the religious people of the day, the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They came from everywhere to gang up on Jesus and accuse him of blasphemy. They grumbled at his disciples for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. They insinuated Jesus was not spiritual at all. Jesus responded by investing his time and energy in people who were like new wineskins, those open and eager to learn. Now in today’s passage, the Pharisees come with more criticisms of Jesus for not keeping the Sabbath. In Luke’s Gospel they’re going to continue criticizing him for this (13:10–17; 14:1–6). What’s this controversy all about?

In chapter 6 Luke begins by recording two Sabbath incidents back-to-back to show that this was more than a controversy over how strictly we should be keeping God’s laws. Look at verse 1. Jesus is going around, no doubt carrying out his ministry, and his disciples are with him. But it’s not easy to keep up with Jesus, and it seems they’ve had little time to eat. While cutting through this grainfield the disciples are so hungry they start plucking and eating heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands to get to the kernels. It’s quite a bit of detail. The point is not to tell us that the disciples are stealing, but that they’re doing what some would consider work on the Sabbath. And this is exactly what the Pharisees say (2). It’s curious that these Pharisees are out there in that grainfield. It looks like they’re spying. Even worse, they seem to view themselves as the religious police. They’re out to catch people violating the law of the Sabbath. At that time there were 39 categories of activity the experts had classified to be illegal on the Sabbath. What a burden (11:46)!

But the Sabbath law God originally gave was very simple: work hard for six days but do no work on the Sabbath. God’s point in creating this Sabbath day of rest was to help people be restored in him, and, to create a pattern of life and society where people are not overworked and burned out due to greed and ambition. The Sabbath law was never meant to be taken to extremes to prevent hungry people from eating. In fact, if we take the time to read it carefully, we find that God built into his law a deep sense of respect and compassion for human beings. He even told farmers to leave some grain in their fields and allow the poor to eat it free of charge. But the Pharisees had developed a religious approach to use God’s law to control people. They were very proud of their own strict adherence to all the specific details they’d added to God’s laws and looked down on anybody who wasn’t doing the same. What’s worse, they’re now using their version of the law to try and discredit Jesus. If this is how the religious leaders of the day are thinking and acting, it shows not only how ridiculous they’re being, but how they’ve created a toxic environment that stifles people.

So how does Jesus respond? Look at verses 3–4. Jesus reminds them of an incident with David before he became king (1Sa21:1–7). He was on the run from King Saul who was trying to kill him. He and his men were hungry, and he asked the priest to give him some of the bread of the Presence, which only priests were allowed to eat, and he gave some to his men as well. If the disciples’ eating grain was breaking a rule, this was way more serious. But who dared criticize David, known as “a man after God’s own heart” (1Sa13:14; Ac13:22)? Jesus was even closer to God and understood the spirit of his laws. In verse 5 he says, “The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.” Though David was great, Jesus the promised Messiah is far greater, and he’s now in their midst. As “lord” Jesus has authority to say what’s right or wrong on the Sabbath. In other words, it’s not a good mindset to be criticizing him or questioning what he’s doing.

The next story is even worse. Look at verse 6. Jesus is always serving God’s word on the Sabbath as a source of spiritual food and real rest for the people. This time there’s a man sitting there whose hand is withered. The medical doctor Luke points out that it’s his right hand. “Withered” suggests there’s no way for it to be restored. We don’t know if the man was born this way or if there’s been some accident. But most people being right-handed, it emphasizes that he’s not able to fully function in life. Their culture taught that such misfortunes happened due to some sin in the person or their ancestors (Jn9:2). If people had such problems they were ashamed. The man’s hand isn’t just a physical problem; it’s a serious life issue that’s left a deep scar on his heart. Still he’s there in the synagogue on the Sabbath to hear God’s word.

Look at verse 7. The term “watch closely” is literally to look out of the corner of one’s eye like a spy. It’s one of the most disturbing verses in the Bible. These so-called religious people have no pity on this man. All they can think about is how to find some way to accuse Jesus. Honestly they’re kind of crazy. What could be wrong with healing somebody on the Sabbath? Again, they considered healing another form of work. Getting medical attention on the Sabbath was allowed only in life-threatening situations; people with chronic conditions were encouraged to seek help some other day (13:14). These men rightly understand that Jesus will see this man with great compassion. Some people imagine they even planted him there as a kind of bait, though the Bible doesn’t actually say that. But their heartlessness shows how spiritually dark those times were. Their version of religion is about keeping the strictest rules, with no concern for suffering people whatsoever. Their hearts are so hard.

Read verse 8. Luke often tells us that Jesus knows people’s thoughts (5:22; 9:47; 11:17; 24:38). We can even be at church looking like we’re good but have evil thoughts in our hearts, and Jesus knows it. In that tense environment, nobody has the courage to say or do anything. But Jesus asks the man to come up to the front and stand next to him. What’s the purpose of this? Jesus wants people to really take a look at the man. Though he’s probably been hiding in the back, Jesus encourages him to come forward. By having a chance to really look at him, people can see that it’s not just his hand but his whole person that’s been affected. Jesus is appealing not just to their minds but to their hearts and consciences. He’s also giving the man a chance to exercise some of his own faith. He would have to really trust Jesus to do this, and he does.

Then comes a most powerful question. Read verse 9. Partly Jesus is exposing the evil in the Pharisees’ hearts—they’re there to do evil and to destroy. But he’s also telling us a principle of how to keep the Sabbath. It’s much bigger than just doing no work—it’s a day to do good and to save life. The whole law of God is summed up in two ways: love God and love others as we love ourselves (Mk12:30–31). Apostle Paul taught: “…for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments…are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’…therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Ro13:8–10; cf. Gal5:14). Keeping the Sabbath is not about strict rules but about finding authentic ways to love God and love people.

Look at verse 10. Jesus looks around at them all, appealing again to their hearts. He refuses to be intimidated, and he courageously tells the man, “Stretch out your hand.” It says simply that the man’s hand is restored. It’s impossible to argue with that. Jesus did good on the Sabbath. Jesus came to restore people. Jesus came to touch and heal our deepest life wounds so that we don’t have to hide or live in shame anymore. Jesus is ready to risk everything to help even one suffering person. He knows these Pharisees will be furious and start plotting to eliminate him (11). But he’s the good shepherd who’s ready to lay down his life for the sheep (Jn10:11). He’s calling us to do the same.

All this is just backdrop to the main part of the passage. Read verse 12. It’s the only time this Greek word appears in the New Testament, and it refers to an all-night prayer vigil. What’s the point? It shows how Jesus deals with rising opposition. With the incessant scrutiny and criticism of the Pharisees Jesus feels the spiritual darkness all around him. He knows his time on earth is limited. There are still many kinds of darkness in our world today. For starters we might think of violence and cruelty. But self-righteousness, jealousy and harshly criticizing are especially dark. To Jesus it must be especially disturbing that, in the name of religion, people occupying places of authority care only about enforcing their own narrow views, and about their own positions, not about people, and not really about God, either. This is what drives him to an all-night prayer session alone.

When we see darkness in ourselves, in others or in the world, what do we do? We may get angry, or depressed, or feel ashamed or hopeless. But Jesus prays. He goes to God alone and pours out his soul to him. He’s seeking God’s wisdom and guidance. It’s not a brief prayer, but an intense spiritual wrestling that lasts until day comes. Even on a personal level it’s good to exercise the privilege of prayer. When we’re tempted, or about to get angry, we can step away from what we’re doing and really turn to God in prayer. It may seem weird, but it’s the best way to fight against the devil, who’s behind all the darkness. It’s true in ministry, too. Criticism from church people, even if they’re just thinking it, can drag us down, derail and demoralize us. But instead of brooding, we need to come to God in prayer. The best thing to do when criticized is to cry out to God, asking him to restore the joy and love for people in our hearts (6:22–23,27,35).

What happens next? Read verse 13. This is the answer Jesus receives from his all-night prayer: re-focus on developing apostles. The word “apostle” means one who is sent. It means sent with the authority of Jesus (10:16). More than the other Gospel writers, Luke frequently refers to these men as “apostles” (6:13; 9:10; 17:5; 22:14; 24:10). Why? The term suggests he’s sending soldiers. It tells us this is spiritual warfare strategy. It may seem like a small thing, but it’s so big and bold. It’s like declaring a world war spiritually. It means preparing for a spiritual invasion of God’s light into all the darkness, through these people. Instead of complaining about rampant sin, selfishness, superficial religion and unbelief, or just hiding or struggling not to be influenced, like our Lord Jesus we need to challenge the darkness of our times and attack it. We do this not by fighting culture wars or getting sucked into politics. We do it not with our own strength or abilities, but with fervent prayer in faith, and specifically, by praying to raise apostles like Jesus did. We have no means or ability to do it. But when we believe in the living, Almighty and Sovereign God who answers prayer for Jesus’ sake, and just depend on him, we are well able to overcome any obstacles (Nu13:30) and raise modern-day apostles of our Lord Jesus.

The number twelve suggests Jesus is restoring the entire nation of Israel into the new people of God (e.g. Ro9:6; Gal3:29). Who are these twelve men? Look at verses 14–16. Jesus has asked God to show him who he wants, and now he chooses all common men (Ac4:13). First on the list is Simon Peter. He’s the epitome of a chosen apostle. What’s so special about him? He’s just a fisherman. In himself he’s so weak that Satan can sift him like wheat (22:31–32). But as we saw in chapter 5, he’s a man who really listens to Jesus’ word ahead of his own ideas or desires. That’s precisely the quality of a person Jesus can use. There’s also a variety. There’s Matthew the former tax collector for Rome, but also his opposite, Simon the Zealot. There’s Philip, a very smart man, and Thomas, a doubter, and even Judas Iscariot, a traitor. Why such variety? It’s so that each person can reach his own kind of people. They’re all like new wineskins (5:38). They’re all willing to be fully trained by Jesus (6:40). They all have honest and good hearts (8:15). They’re all hardworking men who can be laborers in the spiritual harvest (10:2). There’ve always been skeptics and cynics who have no intention of believing. But in every time and place there are always people with humble hearts and learning minds like these twelve. We just have to be patient and prayerful until we find them.

Read verse 13 again. May God help us learn the heart of Jesus to care for wounded and broken people and defend and serve them, no matter how much we may be misunderstood or criticized. May he help us find our direction in prayer to focus on raising new apostles of Christ for our times.