

12 Disciples Series: #6: Simon: The Zealous Disciple  
Romans 10:1-4 (NRSV) and Mark 3:13-19 (NIV)  
By John Gill

Well, we knew it had to happen sooner or later... You can't preach a series of sermons on the twelve disciples of Jesus without eventually being confronted by one of those two-or-three obscure men whom history has overlooked – disciples who would be completely forgotten if it weren't for their names appearing in the lists of disciples which we find in the Gospels and in the Book of Acts. That's the situation with our disciple for this morning, "Simon." (who is not to be confused with Simon Peter – that's a different person all together).

We have no stories about this "Simon" at all – no account of his call or conversion – no mention of him in any of the stories of Jesus – and no description of his ministry in the Book of Acts. Yes, this Simon is about as obscure a biblical figure as you can find.

So, you might ask, "How can we know anything at all about this man?" How can anyone preach a sermon on someone who is no more than a footnote to the Gospel story?

Well, it would be all but impossible - if it were not for the words the Bible uses to distinguish him from the other, more prominent "Simon" among the disciples. Whenever this disciple is mentioned, he is referred to as Simon, "the Zealot."

No, we can't know much about Simon the man, but we can assume some things about Simon "the zealot," because history tells us a lot about the zealot movement that was active in Jesus' day.

Who were the Zealots? That's a good question. It's not surprising that you may not know much about them because, outside of Simon's name, the Bible doesn't ever refer to Zealots directly. But they were there, none the less, and their presence and influence may have had a direct impact on the course of Jesus' ministry.

As you know, Israel was an occupied land in Jesus' day. It was part of the vast Roman Empire that dominated most all of the known world at that time. The Jewish people despised the Roman occupation of their land. They remembered how God had given them this "promised land" to be theirs forever. Yet, for most of their history, other nations had ruled over them.

When your land is occupied by foreigners, you can react in one of several ways:

Some of the Jews were pragmatists, and sided with the Romans ("If you can't beat them, join them."). Matthew and Paul both started out as pragmatists who sided with the Romans: one collected Roman taxes from his Jewish neighbors, the other was actually a Roman citizen.

Other Jews were less overt in supporting the Romans, but they readily adapted their lives to Roman culture. They were tolerant of pagan beliefs and practices and may have even enjoyed

the privileges of doing business with the Romans. These were known as “Hellenized Jews,” - Jews who had happily adapted to Greek and Roman culture. We know they existed because, on the floor of some Jewish synagogues from Jesus’ day that have been excavated, archeologists have found mosaics containing the signs of the Greek zodiac.

Still other Jews tried to ignore the Romans. Most Jews in Jesus’ day disliked the presence of the Romans on their land but tried to go on with life as usual, as best they could, pretending the Romans didn’t exist. But deep down, they hated the Romans. They would curse them under their breath – but rarely would they express their hatred in public.

They would leave that to the Zealots. To most Jews, the Zealots were considered “freedom fighters,” fighting a guerilla war against the occupation army. We might call them “patriots,” but the Romans would have called them “terrorists.” (Think of the radical Islamic terrorists of the 9-11 attacks, or right-wing or left-wing militias active in America today.) You see, they were militant nationalists who longed for the day when the Romans would be driven out of the land of Israel.

The Zealots believed they were engaged in a “holy war” against Rome – that, if they made the first move, then God would be forced to intervene in the conflict and the pagans would finally be driven out of their land, once and for all. (Sound familiar? As I said, in many ways, these Jewish Zealots had a lot in common with those Islamic zealots – and even the hate-motivated militias we are facing today.) They were men of great passion and commitment who would stop at nothing to advance their cause – even if that meant terrorism, assassination, and murder.

So you see, even though we know very little about this obscure disciple, “Simon,” what little we do know is intriguing, to say the least!

What does it tell us about Jesus that he would number among his disciples one who was called “The Zealot?” We might be able to understand how a Zealot could have become a disciple of Jesus when we realize just how strong the Zealot movement was in Galilee. You see, Galilee was the birthplace of the Zealot uprising, and two of the Zealots’ most important strongholds overlooked the valley where Jesus was ministering – in the east, a mountain named Gamala, and in the west, a rugged cliff named Arbel. At night, the people of the valley could look up and see the signal-lights, as the Zealots sent messages across the valley.

Certainly, when Jesus traveled around the Galilee preaching his sermons, there were Zealots and Zealot-sympathizers in his audience. They came to hear what this new rabbi had to say. And some must have liked what they heard. Perhaps, - a young Zealot named Simon.

You see, the Zealots were looking for the Messiah – God’s chosen one who would rise up to lead a revolution and restore Israel to its former greatness. And it seems that Simon may have decided that Jesus was that Messiah. Throughout Jesus’ ministry, over and over again, the

disciples and those in the crowds try to make Jesus into this political figure who would drive out the Romans, and then reign as King.

And we might forgive the disciples for their confusion. Throughout his ministry, Jesus often said and did things that might lead them to believe that Jesus intended to be a political figure. He even would speak about the “kingdom that is among you” and told parables that described this new kingdom of God that he had come to usher in. You remember that the Gospel of John tells us that, at one point, the people of Galilee are so enamored with Jesus that they want to make him their king, but Jesus slips away. (John 6:15) On another occasion, the mother of the disciples, James and John, asks Jesus to grant that her two boys might be Jesus’ right and left hand men when Jesus establishes his kingdom. (Mat. 20:21)

Then, as Jesus drew near Jerusalem in his final week on earth, Jesus orchestrated a procession into the city that looked just like a victor’s procession after a great military campaign (except that instead of a stallion, Jesus chose to ride a lowly donkey – in order to fulfill the Old Testament prophecy about the coming Messiah). The crowd waved palm branches – the symbol of Jewish independence, creating a political demonstration as if it were the coronation of their new king of the Jews. And the Romans took notice – a rival king would have to be put down. As you recall, the charge against Jesus would be that he claimed to be a “king.” As Jesus and the disciples prepare to go to the Garden of Gethsemane following the Last Supper and it has become clear that there is a looming confrontation with the authorities, Luke tells us that Peter grabs two swords, ready to lead the charge. (Luke 22:38) And, as we will see in a few weeks when we consider the tragic case of Judas, one explanation of why Judas betrayed Jesus to the authorities is that he wanted to force Jesus’ hand – believing that Jesus would then call on legions of angels to lead the Jews to a glorious victory. (Luke 22:1-6)

Even as Jesus is preparing to ascend to heaven following his resurrection, according to the Book of Acts, the disciples still are looking to Jesus to usher in a new Jewish state: They ask, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?” (Acts 1:6) Yes, Simon is called a Zealot, but it seems, even the other disciples had expectations that Jesus was laying the groundwork for a revolution.

Simon was looking for that kind of Messiah, and he believed he had found him in Jesus.

That would explain how a Zealot might be attracted to Jesus. But why would Jesus give encouragement to the Zealots and their radical political views by inviting one of them into his inner circle? In light of all that has happened in our world since Sept. 11, 2001, it’s hard for us to understand how Jesus could call a disciple that had terrorist leanings!

After struggling with that dilemma, I’ve come to believe that Jesus chose Simon to follow him deliberately. In choosing Simon the Zealot, I think Jesus wants to make an important point about “religious zeal.”

Zeal is an important quality for a disciple. Throughout the Bible, God calls his people to be zealous in their faith. In Romans 12:11, Paul writes, “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” In Revelations 3, the risen Christ condemns the Church at Laodicea for their lack of zeal, accusing them of being lukewarm. He charges them with these words: “Those whom I love I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.” Zeal is important – even vital!

That zeal, when it is properly directed is of great value to Christ. Probably the most powerful example of this is the Apostle Paul. In the Book of Acts, when Paul is making his defense and his sharing his testimony, he admits that he was the most zealous Jew – so much so that he attacked the followers of Jesus – until he met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, and Jesus refocused his zeal for the cause of Christ. (Acts 22:3-10)

Could it be that, on one level, Jesus admired the commitment and passion of the Zealots – their resistance to compromising with the world, and their willingness to go to the death for what they believed in? After all, didn't he call on us as his followers to “take up our cross” – to be willing to die if needs be?

Simon's zeal may have been misdirected, but - is it possible that Jesus saw some qualities in Simon that would prepare him well for the future he would have to face as an apostle?

You know, I think Jesus called Simon to follow him precisely for the purpose of re-directing his zeal. It's just as Paul wrote to the Romans in our first lesson today: “My prayer for them is that they may be saved. I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened...” Simon had un-enlightened zeal that Jesus wanted to re-focus.

Before he had met Christ, Simon's religious passion was motivated by hate – hate for Rome, and hate for Jews who compromised with Rome. (Again - not unlike what we see from Islamic zealots, or white supremacist militias in America today – passion, driven by hate, rather than love.) But in Simon, Christ refocused that zeal. No longer would Simon be driven by hate, now he would have a passion for love. As it is written in Galatians 4:18: “It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good...” Perhaps that is why, even after Simon becomes a follower of Christ, he is still referred to as “Simon the Zealot...” because he still had a passion – now, a passion to share the love of Christ with the world.

That's about all we can learn about Simon from what the Bible says, based only on his name. Well, the Bible may not tell us much about Saint Simon, but church tradition does.

After the Resurrection of Christ, Simon is said to have traveled, first to Egypt, and then through north Africa to the city of Carthage. From there he is believed to have sailed to Spain, and then north to Britain. But the political situation in Britain was very difficult at that time, and after only a brief ministry there, Simon probably set sail for Palestine. Tradition then tells us that he ended up in Persia (what is today, Iran) with the disciple Jude (aka Thaddaeus). There they

were both martyred for their faith. It is said that Simon died being sawed in half. That's why the symbol for St. Simon is a saw.

In reflecting on the disciple, Simon, I believe there is a warning we all need to heed: How easy it is for us to misdirect our zeal. How tempting it is for us to allow our passion for God to become self-righteous arrogance and seek to do harm to others – in God's name. We see that so much in our world today. We see it in Islamic Zealots. We see it even to some extent in the Christian world – angry Christians who self-righteously are quick to condemn others for their sins, rather than seeking to love them, and allowing God's love to change them.

How quickly we can fall into the same trap that Simon had fallen into – to focus our zeal on hate rather than on love! If we are not careful, our passion for God can become a misdirected zeal that does great harm to the cause of Christ. Like Paul and Simon, we need to allow the Spirit of Christ to redirect our zeal. As Paul wrote in Romans, "Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good." (Rom. 12:21)

You see, Simon never stopped being zealous for his faith – he only had his passion redirected by Jesus – a passion for love – a passion for Christ.

What about you? Does your zeal cause you to be quick to judge others or even harbor hate towards them? Or, are you driven by a passion for love? Are you a zealot for the way of Christ?

Or, let me leave this question with you to think about this week: When future generations speak of you as a disciple of Jesus, will they describe you as being "zealous" – with a passion for love?

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Prayer:

Romans 12:9-11 - "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord."

Let us pray,  
Holy God, as we have considered your servant, Simon the Zealot,  
we confess that we are not as passionate  
in our love for you and your kingdom as we ought to be.  
Forgive us, Lord, for how lukewarm we have become.  
Rekindle in us a fire of zealous-love for you and for others.  
May we have an "enlightened zeal" for you, O God.

We are mindful this morning that the anniversary of the 9-11 attacks has just passed, and of the awful consequences that can follow

when our zeal is mis-directed into destructive actions  
that cause great harm to others - and to our witness as Christians.

O merciful God, you love all your children – all the people of this world and this nation,  
regardless of their race or nationality or creed or political party –  
with a love that is beyond our understanding.

How your heart must break  
as you observe the horrible things we say and do to one another,  
often motivated by an un-enlightened zeal, driven by hate.  
You intend for all those living in this nation – and all around our world –  
to live together in love as brothers and sisters,  
and yet, we, the children you created in your image,  
detest, slander, and even kill one another.  
How you must grieve at the mess we have made of your world.  
We have perverted your perfect will and purpose for your creation.  
Forgive us, Lord.

Lord, just as you redirected the zeal of Simon,  
we ask that you would refocus our zeal, this morning.  
Help us to finally set aside our impulse to self-righteous anger,  
and replace it is a passion to show love –  
even to those we disagree with – even with those we are prone to despise and hate.  
May we finally learn the lesson Paul teaches us,  
not to “repay evil for evil...” but to “live at peace with everyone.”  
Help us not to “avenge” ourselves...but leave room for God’s wrath.”  
May we no longer “be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Rom. 12)

One way we seek the good for others is through praying for them.  
We pray for our family, friends, and neighbors –  
but, may we also pray for those we can’t see eye-to-eye with, or even hate –  
not that they might change,  
but that we might be changed in our attitudes and actions toward them.  
May we not only pray for these folks,  
but find ways we can be zealous with love for them.

Lord, may your Holy Spirit fall upon us, filling us with a passion driven by love,  
that we might share love with all we meet.  
We pray all this in the name of the One whose love has transformed us, even Jesus Christ,  
who taught us how to pray, when he said, “Our Father, who art in heaven.... Amen.”