The 12 Disciples – Their Occupations
The Sea of Galilee offered fishermen a livelihood for many generations. Perhaps that is why at least seven of the disciples were fishermen. The calling of the Jewish fishermen was the first step by which God would bring the light of the Gospel to shine on all people.

Much of a fisherman’s day was spent mending or washing his nets. Andrew was doing just that when Jesus called him as a disciple (Luke 5:2). His brother, Peter, watched Jesus climb into his boat, then preach to the people. He realized that Jesus was not only a prophet, but someone to whom he would surrender his life. James and his brother, John, were mending nets with their father when Jesus called them. These two “sons of Zebedee” were not just fishermen. As business owners, they hired other men to work for them.

While fishing was a respectable vocation, not all the occupations of the 12 disciples were viewed favorably. When Jesus first called Matthew, the disciple was sitting at the tax collector’s booth (Matthew 9:9-13). Matthew belonged to the class of Jewish tax collectors (mokhsa) who extorted money from travelers. Publicans or tax collectors were despised, regarded as traitors to their own people. Their money was considered unclean and those taxed would avoid asking for change. A publican’s money could not be tithed to the temple. Publicans were forbidden to testify in court. A good Jew would not even associate with publicans in private life. Jesus upset the Pharisees when He enjoyed a meal at Matthew’s house (Matthew 9:10-13).

While not strictly a profession, Simon the Canaanite, earned the title of zealot. His fierce loyalty to his faith and Israel was evident. The zealots were a religious sect, zelotes, from the Greek ‘zealous one.’ Zealots would attempt to arouse rebellion among the Jews. Like others, Simon stubbornly insisted that the Jews must rebel against the Roman (Pompey’s) invasion of Palestine in 63 B.C. This invasion had destroyed the Jews’ hopes of restoring their own government once again. Zealots, like Simon, engaged in politics and anarchy in hopes of instigating a revolution that would overthrow the Roman government. When Simon joined Jesus as a disciple, he remained zealous, but with a new allegiance and loyalty to Jesus, rather
than a political revolution.

**Unknown Occupations**

Not all the occupations of the 12 disciples are known. Thomas and Bartholomew (Nathanael) may have been fishermen, who joined the other five disciples, returning to their profession after Jesus’ crucifixion (John 21:2-3). It is possible that these disciples had learned the fishing trade as young men. This time the risen Christ would show Himself not to all Twelve, but to only seven of them. In all likelihood Philip, James (the son of Alphaeus), and Judas (Thaddaeus) were tradesmen of some sort. Regardless of their professions, eleven of the disciples immediately left behind everything to follow Jesus. Judas Iscariot, chosen by Jesus as treasurer, appears to be the only disciple who struggled continually with financial insecurity.

The skills needed in the occupations of the 12 disciples became applicable to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20). Fishermen often worked long into the night, using two types of nets. The circular net, about 15 feet (4.5 meters) in diameter with fine mesh, was cast in shallow water. The long net—sometimes nearly 328 feet (100 meters) long and 8 feet (2.5 meters) wide—was a dragnet in deeper waters. A well-flung net would drop over a school of fish, bringing in everything it had trapped. The disciples would be “casting their nets” in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The Lord would provide the miraculous catch.

The once prosperous Matthew, along with the other disciples, learned that God would meet their every need as they preached. “Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep” (Matthew 10:5-10). Jesus sent these ordinary men out, endowed with His own power and authority. As long as they relied on His strength, they were unstoppable. “Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it” (Mark 16:20).

**The 12 Disciples – Why These Men?**

After Jesus had endured the temptation in the wilderness, He “returned to Galilee in the power of the Holy Spirit.” He tried to speak in His hometown of Nazareth, but was rejected. So spiritually blinded were the people of the
synagogue that they tried to kill Jesus by attempting to throw Him off a cliff. Jesus chose to establish His base and a new team in Capernaum, a beautiful town nearby, on the edge of the Sea of Galilee. The prophet, Isaiah, had prophesied that Jesus would live in Capernaum. “In the future he [Jesus] will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan” (Isaiah 9:1).

The selection of the Twelve demanded the utmost deliberation as well as sacrifice. Prior to Jesus choosing these men, He fervently sought to fulfill the will of God, the Father. “. . . Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God” (Luke 6:12). These men would not only be His followers, but individuals who would be closest to Him. In every way, the Son of God chose to be vulnerable to these individuals. They would witness His fury against the moneychangers, His grief at a dear friend’s death, and His misery as they abandoned Him in the Garden of Gethsemane (John 2:13-16; 11:35; Mark 14:32-42). Still these men were the sort of people God has always desired—the humble. Despite their faults, the Twelve were teachable. Jesus wanted men who could understand the struggles of the broken-hearted, the poor, and the afflicted.

**The 12 Disciples – Before and After**

Jesus could not have picked a more diverse group of men to accomplish His divine purpose. By human standards, the Twelve had very little in common with one another—one unpredictable fisherman, possibly one with a bias against Nazareth, a fanatic Jewish nationalist, a despised tax-collector, a skeptic/pessimist, two “Sons of Thunder” with explosive tempers, and a covetous betrayer. They argued among themselves about which disciple would be the greatest (Luke 9:46; 22:24). He showed displeasure when they contradicted Him (Matthew 16:23). Repeatedly, Jesus spoke of His betrayal, death, and resurrection (Matthew 16:21-22; Mark 9:30; Luke 18:31-34), yet the disciples faltered.

- “All the disciples deserted [Jesus] and fled” (Matthew 26:56)
- “Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen” (Mark 16:20).
- “Jesus himself stood among [the disciples] and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ They were startled and frightened . . . He said to them,

The Twelve would witness miracles of healing, power over nature, and of raising the dead. Yet it wasn’t until “after” Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension that the disciples’ were transformed. Prior to His Ascension, Jesus “opened the disciples’ minds so they could understand the Scriptures.” Upon returning to His Father, Jesus would fulfill God’s promise—clothing them with the Holy Spirit’s power (Luke 24:45-49). The Holy Spirit supplied the driving force, enabling the disciples to accomplish the mandate Jesus had entrusted to them. The Twelve testified of who they knew Jesus Christ to be: Lord of all creation, Redeemer of all who trust in His death for their deliverance from sin, and the Source of eternal life for all who accept Him as their Savior.