

Fishers of Men.

(Luke v., 1 to 11.)

By Rev. James Stalker, D.D.

Innumerable points of resemblance between spiritual and natural fishing have been started by ingenious minds—such as that the fish are taken alive, that through being captured the fishes are brought into contact with one another, that fishing is a social, not a solitary, occupation, and the like—but these are very fanciful. There are a few lessons which are obviously of more importance. One is, that patience is necessary in fishing. The true fisher can ply the rod all day, even though he is taking nothing, and never gives up hope. So in the work of God we must never grow weary, for in due season we shall reap if we faint not. . . . Every fisher has some favorite story to tell of a glorious hour in the early morning or the late evening when the water, which had been irresponsive, became suddenly alive with fish, and he hauled them out at almost every cast. And there is something very similar to this in the spiritual world. Faithful preaching will, indeed, always command a certain amount of success, and the Spirit is given to those that ask Him; yet there are times when the hearts of men seem so hard that no appeals can soften them, and, on the other hand, there are seasons of revival when the labor of a lifetime is repaid in a single month.

A third lesson is that in both kinds of fishing skill is needed. The fisher with the rod has to know how to choose his flies and how to cast his line, and he has to become so well acquainted with the stream as to be aware where the prey lies. It is astonishing how seldom a beginner catches a big trout, but a practiced hand can lift them out where the beginner can get nothing. In fishing with the net, I have no doubt, equal skill is required; and certainly the spiritual fisher is never done learning the secrets of his art. He has continually to be making himself better acquainted with human nature and better acquainted with the Word of God. One kind of temperament has to be taken boldly and another to be approached cautiously; one has to be driven with fear and another drawn with love. No two cases are exactly the same; but the fisher of men has to adapt himself to every case.

Jesus is Himself the living specimen of all His own teaching, and never was this more true than in the present case; in the whole of this incident He showed Himself a most expert fisher of men. The very choice of this figure of speech belonged to the spiritual fisher's art, for no other metaphor could so completely capture the minds of fishermen. . . . In times of discouragement they would especially recall the incident of this occasion. They had toiled all the night and taken nothing; yet Jesus commanded: "Launch forth into the deep." They might have replied that they knew bet-

ter than ~~the~~ about fishing; but St. Peter gave the right answer: "Lord, at Thy word I will;" and the result abundantly justified his faith. So, however discouraging the prospects or however strong the opposition, we must not hesitate if only Jesus says the word; and the success will often be the greatest at the time and in the place where least has been expected. Would not St. Peter remember the haul of this day when on the day of Pentecost no fewer than three thousand were converted by one sermon of his?

From the very beginning of this scene we see Jesus as the accomplished fisher of men. Why was it that He had to get into St. Peter's boat? Was it not because He had caught so many that there was not room enough to contain them? His hearers were so numerous that He was like to be pushed into the sea. How did He attract so vast a multitude? That was good fishing. Some preachers affect to despise numbers, but I suppose they draw as many as they can; and where the right word is spoken men will respond. If our preaching were more like that of Jesus—if it were anything like as direct a revelation of the mind of God, and if it went anything like as straight to the hearts of men—we would experience a measure of His success.

We see Him still further as the Fisher of men when He asks the loan of the boat and converts it into a pulpit. There is no way of interesting people so effectually in the good work as giving them a hand in it. If you wish to interest people in you, get them to confer a favor upon you; this will interest them far more than if you conferred a favor on them. But Jesus did also confer a favor on the fishermen; He paid by the draught of fishes for the use of the boat. In so doing He had something very practical in view. He was soon about to ask these men to give up all and follow Him. But inevitably in their minds the question would arise how they were to be supported, especially if, like St. Peter, they were married men. By showing that He had all the resources of nature at His disposal, Jesus assured them beforehand that, if they obeyed His call, He would provide for their wants. And this is a lesson for all time: If God needs us He will provide the means.

It was, however, St. Peter himself whom Jesus was most intent on catching on this occasion; and the skilful Fisherman did not miss His prey. The forth-putting of His power in the miracle created an overwhelming sense of the divine presence, which had on St. Peter the same effect as it had on Job when he cried: "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eyes see Thee; wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes," and on Isaiah when he cried: "Woe is me, for I am undone, for I am a man of unclean lips." St. Peter recoiled from Jesus, crying out: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful

man, O Lord;" but in reality he was being drawn so close to Jesus that nothing could ever part them. The hook has stuck in his conscience, and this is where it holds best. There are parts of the fish where, if the hook catches hold, it easily loses it again; but there are others in which, if it strikes, it sticks. So in preaching, if the truth only touches the fancy or the feelings, the impression is very apt to be lost, but when the conscience is deeply affected, the impression is likely to be permanent. There are no conversions so trustworthy as those which begin with a deep conviction of sin. The spiritual fishermen therefore who imitate Jesus will not be content with merely tickling the ears of men, but will aim at the conscience and make use of the solemnities of sin, atonement unto eternity. Indeed, it is by such experiences that true fishers of men are produced. If we are to catch men we must first be caught ourselves; and the deeper our own convictions are at this crisis the more able shall we be to produce repentance and to command the grace of God.

Look at the incredible ease of prayer. Every time, place, posture is fitting. Talent is not needed. Eloquence is out of place. Our want is our eloquence, our misery is our recommendation. Thought is quick as lightning, and quick as lightning can it multiply effectual prayer. Actions can pray; sufferings can pray. The whole function is expressed in a word; it is simply this—the child at his father's knee, his words stumbling over each other from very earnestness, and his wistful face pleading better than his hardly intelligible prayer.—F. W. Faber.

Here is a noble resolve found in the journal of an old Puritan divine: "Resolved that, when I address a large meeting, I shall remember that God is there, and that will make it small; resolved that, when I address a small meeting, I shall remember that God is there, and that will make it great." The recollection of God's presence in the first instance prevents the minister from being lifted up with pride and conceit; and in the second, from being discouraged and cast down. At present God is the needed vitalizer and quickener in all religious assemblies.

We all, in turn, must face our forelorn hours of bereavement. For us, sooner or later, our house must be left unto us desolate. But these natural sorrows are, and are meant to be, full of blessedness; the light of God shining upon them transmutes them into heavenly gold. The wounds which God makes, God heals.—Canon Farrar.

There is a better thing to ask than exemption or escape from sorrows, even grace to bear them rightly.