

# Fishers of Men

At the beginning of His ministry, when Jesus of Nazareth walked along the shores of the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, both fishermen, casting a net. Jesus “said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people’” (Matt 4:19). Both men immediately left their nets and followed Him, as did the sons of Zebedee, James and John. They were called by Jesus to do a particular job, to fish for people. They were not called for personal salvation, which would come as a gift of God. They were called to do a work analogous to the work they were already doing.

The juxtaposition of catching fish and catching people produces an analogy that has more people escaping than being caught even though the same waters are worked for a season. The analogy has the fisherman repeatedly setting his or her nets time and time again, with no certainty of success. Prior to modern electronic aids such as GPS locators and side-scan sonar, fishing was, indeed, a hit and miss vocation. One day a fisherman might follow the gulls, be on a school, make a big haul, and the next day, the same fisherman can barely come home with dinner, with the same amount of work being performed. Much more so than with farming, there is little correlation between work done and fish caught.

The lack of a correlation between work and catch is seen in Scripture when, following Jesus’ crucifixion, disciples returned to the sea, fishing out of Tiberias. They worked throughout the night, but caught nothing (John 21:3). Then just after daybreak, Jesus, from shore, said, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some” (*v.* 6). They did, and they were not able to haul in their net, such was their catch.

A recognizable miracle occurred. By themselves, the disciples caught no fish during the night when the fish were likely to be in shallow, onshore waters, and the net was not as visible to the schools. But after the sun had arisen and the schools of fish should have sought the safety of deeper water, the disciples, following Christ’s instructions, caught more fish

than they could boat.

The lesson that comes forward through time is that without Christ these men who were called to be fishers of people could catch nothing. They weren’t to return to their former vocations. They were to fish for disciples. In a comprehensible story, future disciples learn that these original disciples were called to a single, new vocation: to “proclaim the mighty acts of him who called [disciples] out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). Disciples would henceforth angle for additional disciples with the story of those mighty deeds performed by the Son of Man

What about the ones that get away, or got away? Fisherman can catch a lot of fish, but they don’t catch all of the fish. Some fish, even with modern electronics, avoid trawls, avoid sunken gillnets, avoid seines, avoid longlines, and live to breed another generation of the specie.

Likewise, the mighty deeds of Christ have been proclaimed, but not every person believes the story, which is a little like bait on a hook. Some people nibble around the edges, ever wary of believing anything that lacks solid scientific evidence. Some take a bite, then spit the hook. Some spin the gangion, becoming bait for even larger fish. Some use the tide, or river currents to pull themselves loose, straightening hooks, or tearing hooks from their mouths. Some won’t even look at the bait. And the ways people escape are even more varied than how fish get away. But the fish that don’t escape are boated, bled, gutted, and served as tablefare. From a fish’s perspective, getting caught is not a good thing.

What about people—does the analogy hold? Is getting caught by the story of Jesus’ mighty deeds harmful to a person’s health and general well being?

Jesus told His disciples that if the world hated Him, the world will hate His disciples; that if the world will persecute Him, the world will persecute His disciples (John 15:18–20). He said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a

sword” (Matt 10:34). Jesus went on to say that He had come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother (*vv.* 35–36). The Apostle Paul quotes Psalms 44:11, “For your [God’s] sake we are being killed all day long; / we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered” (Rom 8:36) when listing those things—hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril or sword (*v.* 35)—that will not separate disciples from the love of Christ. If disciples were not experiencing hardship and persecution, there would be no reason to mention that these things couldn’t free disciples from the love of Christ. So by the standards of the world, which would be the fish’s perspective, being caught by God has a downside equal to being served as tablefare.

A great many people will argue that getting caught by the story of the mighty deeds of Christ is neither mentally nor physically desirable. These people will argue that being religious is all right as long as the person doesn’t take his or her religion too seriously, but being spiritually minded requires rejecting the values of “the world,” a linguistic icon used to identify those individuals not yet drawn by the Father. On the night He was betrayed, Jesus told His disciples, “If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own” (John 15:19). The Apostle John writes,

Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever. (1 John 2:15–17)

The world is not, and indeed, cannot be spiritually minded. And those individuals who are not spiritually minded cannot understand the mysteries of God, nor do they have any interest in these mysteries. They are as fish. And debating one of them can be likened to fighting a salmon. On light tackle, they will put up a decent tussle,

but they are in a no-win situation. If they escape, they will continue upstream to breed and die in a few days, or in a few weeks. If they don’t, well, the Kodiak Fishermen Wives published one of the better collections of salmon recipes.

The analogy of being fishers of men highlights the difference between being carnally, or naturally minded, and being spiritually minded. If a person’s concern is for those things that offer bodily comfort—food, clothes, houses, even physical health—then the person is as a fish. Preaching the prosperity gospel is chumming the waters to catch fish. Those individuals who sow their seed into the ministry doing the chumming become so gorged on chum that when they see the sparsely decorated hook cast by genuine disciples of God, they ignore it. The story of the mighty deeds of Christ flashes before them as a trolled teaser, but those disciples who sowed seed into a chumming ministry are no longer interested in the flasher. They certainly don’t want to hear the endtime gospel that *the one who endures to the end will be saved* (Matt 24:13). They aren’t interested in “enduring”; they are interested in receiving. And in preparing to harvest their expected return from the seed they have sown into a chumming ministry, they have received enough *religion* to satisfy themselves. They are content, and they are as carnally minded as fish.

All analogies break down when extended beyond their intent. However, before leaving the story of Jesus telling His disciples to cast the net over the other side of their boat, the story should be reexamined. Commercial fishermen realize there is more to this story than just casting the net to the other side of the boat, and by divine power, setting on a school of fish. Fishermen set their boats up to work from a particular side. For example, most longliners plying Alaskan waters for halibut pick their gear over their vessels’ starboard gunwale. Maine lobstermen usually have their powerblocks on their vessels’ starboard side. Commercial fishermen develop a routine for laying and picking their gear, and that use of “routine” hasn’t changed since when Peter fished the Sea of Galilee. Therefore, for Jesus to

tell disciples to cast their net over the other side of their boat was telling them to break their routine, to do something different from that which they were accustomed. And for them to follow the instructions of a stranger indicates that they were desperate—they didn't recognize Christ until after the fact. To cast a net large enough that the disciples couldn't boat their catch requires that the vessel be rigged so the net could be released without tangling. A hand thrown net, regardless of how adept the person is who throws it, cannot be made large enough that its catch cannot be brought aboard. Scripture records there were seven disciples who agreed to go fishing: Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee, and two others (John 21:2). So the vessel they were fishing wasn't a small skiff, but a vessel large enough to accommodate seven men. Thus, the net was probably some sort of a seine that required its coordinated release and hauling. If that were the case, then to fish over the offside was truly an act of desperation. What they knew to do wasn't working, and hadn't worked throughout the night. Jesus wasn't there with the moneybag, so if they were to eat, they had to catch fish. And on the unlikely chance that it might work, they followed the stranger's advice and laid their net over the offside.

Again, Christians are called to do a work. They are not called to receive physical prosperity, nor personal salvation. One of the better promises of the new covenant is the gift of salvation to those who endure in faith. But the promises of physical prosperity offered to circumcised Israel were linked to Israel keeping the laws of God. Those promises were national, not individual, and they remain valid as a condition of obedience for any nation that will keep the laws of God. Imagine how a national economy would be effected if no one stole. Imagine how a culture would be effected if there were no adultery. The nation would prosper beyond humanity's ability to measure such prosperity. The nations of spiritual Israel will prosper spiritually if it were to keep the laws of God. Imagine how much spiritual growth there would occur individually if all of spiritual Israel

kept the Sabbath. But spiritual prosperity doesn't necessarily have a physical corollary. The writer of Hebrews says, concerning those who have been faithful to God:

Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in the skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—all of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. (Heb 11:36–40)

The promise they were to receive is salvation. They received the promise of salvation upon obedience by faith in God. They were individually faithful, and they received circumcised hearts and minds (Deu 30:6) as a result of their obedience. The second covenant (i.e., the Moab covenant) made with physically uncircumcised Israelites offered receipt of the Holy Spirit to Israel following the demonstration of obedience. When the mediator of this second covenant changed from Moses to Christ, better promises were added. A person first receives the Holy Spirit, which writes the laws of God on the hearts and minds of disciples (Heb 8:10 & 10:16; Jer 31:33) then obedience to these laws of God is expected. The Father doesn't write His laws on a person's heart and mind to have the person ignore those laws. Disciples are called to be spiritual Israelites, not spiritual Gentiles.

The better promise added to the second covenant is receipt of the Holy Spirit prior to when obedience by faith to the laws of God is expected. This better promise is permanent: Jesus told His disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the

Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever....But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, [that] the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:16, 26). After King David sinned in the manner of Bathsheba, he prayed, “Do not cast me away from your presence, / and do not take your holy spirit from me” (Ps 51:11). Jesus confirms that King David had the Holy Spirit: “While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, ‘How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared’” (Mark 12:35–36). So under the second covenant mediated by Moses, receipt of the Holy Spirit was conditional. If a person endured in obedience to the person’s end, the person will be resurrected as a firstfruit upon Christ’s return as the Messiah.

The bait endtime disciples must angle before the world is the message that the person who endures to the end [in faith] will be saved. Enduring will not be easy. If a person thinks like a fish, the person won’t want to have anything to do with this bait; for Jesus said, concerning the sign of His coming and the end of the age,

Then they will hand you [disciples] over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fail away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matt 24:9–13)

This doesn’t sound like the chumming of those who preach the prosperity gospel, does it? Nor does this sound like the Church will be raptured prior to the Tribulation.

The Father has drawn and Christ has called disciples to fish for people throughout this age of grace. But now that humanity has finally arrived at the end of this age, the Father has drawn a

few disciples to set a pick to catch as many migrating Christians as possible. The set is a heart-shaped trap. The seine’s corkline floats over the pages of *Water & Fire*, and its leadline drags over sea urchins and starfish. Christ is the vessel that will tow the pursed seine back inside stream boundary markers that are the laws of God, where the Church will be safe from fishermen who make disciples for themselves rather than for Christ.

Two of every three Christians will swim around the set seine, and will head back into the waters of the world. Like juvenile salmon on their outbound migration, these Christians smell the open waters of materialism. They are the uncircumcised children of parents who died in a spiritual wilderness for their unbelief, and they are on their way to the Nile, which is far from the streams of spiritual Jerusalem.

After Jesus ate His last Passover meal with His disciples, “they went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus said to them, ‘You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, “I will strike the shepherd, / and the sheep of the flock will be scattered”” (Matt 26:30–31). The quotation Jesus cited is from Zechariah, and it continues,

I will turn my hand against the little ones. / In the whole land, says the Lord, two-thirds shall be cut off and perish, / and one-third shall be left alive. / And I will put this third into the fire, / refine them as one refines silver, / and test them as gold is tested. / They will call on my name, / and I will answer them. / I will say, “They are my people”; / and they will say, “The Lord is our God.” (Zech 13:7–9)

If Christ as the Lord will turn His hand against two-thirds of the holy ones—Jesus identifies those who would be scattered as His disciples—then the parable of the pounds makes sense. In that parable, the noblemen summons ten servants and gives them ten pounds, or a pound each. But the citizens of the country hated

the nobleman, “and sent a delegation after him, saying, ‘We do not want this man to rule over us’” (Luke 19:14). When the nobleman returns, only three servants come forward with the pound given to them. The other seven apparently joined the rebellion. And the nobleman says, “But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence” (*v. 27*).

Slaughtering servants who won't be ruled by Christ is certainly turning His hand against them. It is also making tablefare of them. The fish were right. It is a fearful thing to get caught by God—if a person wants to remain a part of the world, or if a person's mind is set upon achieving material wealth and secular power. Disciples caught by God will feel heat and pressure as they are refined and tested. God doesn't promise that all will go well with the person: rather, the promise is salvation for the disciple who endures to the end. And that promise is sure.

*by Homer Kizer*