

000514 AM Mark-12 Fishers of Men

MARK 1:16-20

ARE YOU FISHING FOR ETERNAL SOULS

Jesus asked His disciples to follow Him and fish for eternal souls at perhaps the loveliest spot on earth, a lake in a land called Galilee. The spot is a blue-green lake called the Sea of Galilee or Kinneret as the locals call it. The Sea of Galilee is an oval-shaped body of water about eight miles wide and thirteen miles long, and is nearly 700 feet below sea level. This is first of all the setting for our text today.

Galilee¹ was a land of lush pastures, smiling landscapes, rich farmlands, and a teeming population. Josephus counted 240 towns and villages in the region, each with no fewer than fifteen thousand inhabitants. All the then-known trades flourished there. The lovely Sea of Galilee attracted fishermen, and many people lived on its slopes. Galilee lay close to the Gentile world. A constant procession of foreigners passed through the area along one of the world's main highways. The region was but a fringe of that greater world, and Nazareth was but a secluded corner of Galilee. In that parochial Nazareth Jesus grew to manhood. He spent about nine-tenths of His early life there.

There were many fishermen² in Galilee, Josephus, who, for a time, was governor of Galilee, and who is the great historian of the Jews, tells us that in his day three hundred and thirty fishing boats sailed the water of the lake. Ordinary people in Palestine seldom ate meat, probably not more than once a week. Fish was their staple diet (Luke 11:11; Matthew 7:10; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 24:42). Usually the fish was salt because there was no means of transporting fresh fish. Fresh fish was one of the greatest of all delicacies in the great cities like Rome. The very names of the towns on the lakeside show how important the fishing business was. Bethsaida means House of Fish; Tarichaea means The Place of Salt Fish, and it was there that the fish were preserved for export to Jerusalem and even to Rome itself. The salt fish industry was big business in Galilee.

The Fishermen used two kinds of nets, both of which are mentioned or implied in the gospels. They used the net called the sangene. This was a kind of seine-or trawl-net. It was let out from the end of the boat and was so weighted that it stood, as it were, upright in the water. The boat then moved forward, and as it moved, the four corners of the net were drawn together, so that the net became like a great bag moving through the water and enclosing the fish.

¹ Phillips, John. Exploring the Gospels, Matthew. Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers Inc., 1999, p. 48.

² Barclay, William, the Gospel of Mark. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975, p. 27.

The other kind of net, which Peter and Andrew were using here, was a small, one-man casting net called an *amphiblēstron*. Peter and his brother Andrew were taking turns casting the *amphiblēstron* when Jesus called them to become “fishers of men” (Matt. 4:18-19). The folded net was carried over the fisherman’s shoulder as he waded in shallow water looking for a school of fish. When the fish were near enough, he would hold the center cord in one hand and with the other hand throw the net so that it opened into a large circle and came down over the fish. Weights around the perimeter of the net caused it to sink and trap the fish. The fisherman then pulled on the cord, which was attached to the center of the net and drew it around the fish like a sack. When the net had been pulled closed, the fisherman would haul his catch to shore.

The Sea of Galilee lies 600 feet below the shore level of the Mediterranean Sea, like an emerald jewel glistening in the Sun. Its waters are flourishing life. In Christ's day Josephus tells us, there were no less than 330 boats from 15 cities around the lake who crowded the sea with their nets. As their boats plied those sweet waters they fed a flourishing, international export industry of salted fish. Orders came in from the widest corners of the Roman Empire for the sought after delicacies of Galilee fish.

A fisherman of Century One Galilee was a hard working, skilled business man who knew all about international trade, fishing techniques, and the tools of his demanding trade. This morning we are going to walk by the Sea and listen to Jesus as He asked His followers 20 centuries ago, and us who have joined them, to follow Him as a fisher of the eternal souls of mankind.

Jesus spoke these words as He walked around that beautiful lake and demonstrated what fishing for eternal souls of mankind was all about. Against the background of these cities lining the Sea Jesus performed 60% of all His earthly ministry. He raised the dead, He gave sight to the blind, He gave health to the sick, and He replaced the decay of the lepers, and unshackled the demonized. And all this as He fished for the eternal souls of mankind.

To a handful of these men came an itinerant preacher who asked them to use their skills in becoming fishermen of the eternal souls of mankind.

Mark 1:16-20 And as He walked by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen.17 Then Jesus said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.”18 They immediately left their nets and followed Him.19 When He had gone a little farther from there, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the boat mending their nets.20 And immediately

He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after Him.

A PARABLE OF A FISHLESS FISHERMAN

Issues: Is a person a fisherman³ if year after year he never catches any fish?

Now it came to pass that a group existed who called themselves fishermen. And lo, there were many fish in the waters all around. In fact the whole area was surrounded by streams and lakes filled with fish. And the fish were hungry.

Week after week, month after month, and year after year these who called themselves fishermen met in meetings and talked about their call to fish, the abundance of fish, and how they might go about fishing. Year after year they carefully defined what fishing means, defended fishing as an occupation, and declared that fishing is always to be a primary task of fishermen.

Continually they searched for new and better methods of fishing and for new and better definitions of fishing. Further they said, "The fishing industry exists by fishing as fire exists by burning." They loved slogans such as "Fishing is the task of every fisherman," "Every fisherman is a fisher," and "A fisherman's outpost for every fisherman's club." They sponsored special meetings called "Fishermen's Campaigns" and "The Month for Fisherman to Fish." They sponsored costly nationwide and worldwide congresses to discuss fishing and to promote fishing and hear about all the ways of fishing such as the new fishing equipment, fish calls, and whether any new bait was discovered.

These fishermen built large, beautiful buildings called "Fishing Headquarters." The plea was that everyone should be a fisherman and every fisherman should fish. One thing they didn't do, however: they didn't fish.

In addition to meeting regularly, they organized a board to send out fishermen to other places where there were many fish. All the fishermen seemed to agree that what is needed is a board which could challenge fishermen to be faithful in fishing. The board was formed by those who had the great vision and courage to speak about fishing, to define fishing, and to promote the idea of fishing in faraway streams and lakes where many other fish of different colors lived.

Also the board hired staffs and appointed committees and held many meetings to define fishing, to defend fishing, and to decide what new streams should be thought about. But the staff and committee members did not fish.

³ Drescher, John M., "A Parable of Fishless Fishermen," article first appeared in *Church Growth: American Magazine*, September-October issue, 1978.

Large, elaborate, and expensive training centers were built whose original and primary purpose was to teach fishermen how to fish. Over the years courses were offered on the needs of fish, the nature of fish, where to find fish, the psychological reactions of fish, and how to approach and feed fish. Those who taught had doctorates in fishology. But the teachers did not fish. They only taught fishing. Year after year, after tedious training, many were graduated and were given fishing licenses. They were sent to do full-time fishing, some to distant waters which were filled with fish.

Some spent much study and travel to learn the history of fishing and to see faraway places where the founding fathers did great fishing in the centuries past. They lauded the faithful fishermen of years before who handed down the idea of fishing.

Further, the fishermen built large printing houses to publish fishing guides. Presses were kept busy day and night to produce materials solely devoted to fishing methods, equipment, and programs to arrange and to encourage meetings to talk about fishing. A speakers' bureau was also provided to schedule special speakers on the subject of fishing.

Many who felt the call to be fishermen responded. They were commissioned and sent to fish. But like the fisherman back home they never fished. Like the fishermen back home they engaged in all kinds of other occupations. They built power plants to pump water for fish and tractors to plow new waterways. They made all kinds of equipment to travel here and there to look at fish hatcheries. Some also said they wanted to be part of the fishing party, but they felt called to furnish fishing equipment. Others felt their job was to relate to the fish in a good way so the fish would know the difference between good and bad fishermen. Others felt that simply letting the fish know they were nice, land-loving neighbors and how loving and kind they were was enough.

After one stirring meeting on "The Necessity for Fishing," one young fellow left the meeting and went fishing. The next day he reported he had caught two outstanding fish. He was honored for his excellent catch and scheduled to visit all the big meetings possible to tell how he did it. So he quit his fishing in order to have time to tell about the experience to the other fishermen. He was also placed on the Fishermen's General Board as a person having considerable experience.

Now it's true that many of the fishermen sacrificed and put up with all kinds of difficulties. Some lived near the water and bore the smell of dead fish every day. They received the ridicule of some who made fun of their fishermen's clubs and the fact they claimed to be fishermen yet never fished. They wondered about those who felt it was of little use to attend the weekly meetings to talk about fishing. After all, were they not following the Master who said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men?"

Imagine how hurt some were when one day a person suggested that those who didn't catch fish were really not fishermen, no matter how much they claimed to be. Yet it did sound correct. Is a person a fisherman if year after year he never catches a fish? Is one following if he isn't fishing?

THE CALLING

So we have seen the setting, now let's examine Christ's calling of these fishermen, it has 3 parts: the pattern, the power and the prize. First Jesus gives a pattern.

THE PATTERN

Look back at Mark 1:15 again. Notice that Jesus' original preaching had three emphases: *the Kingdom, repentance, and belief.*

How about if we back up through that verse to emphasize the three elements of Christ's preaching.

First, Jesus' preaching called men and women to "believe in the gospel." This was the good news that God's Kingdom was about to happen. They were to believe that Messiah who was promised had come. After the Cross the essential message would be, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). But we see that Jesus' original preaching contained the essence of what we call today gospel preaching. From God's Word we see that this is the way salvation is to be preached. We must be committed with all our hearts to preaching justification by faith alone.

Second, Jesus preached repentance. The Bible portrays a saving faith that is life changing faith, otherwise it is dead or non-saving faith. This element of the gospel has fallen on hard times.

The result⁴ is that in America today there are multitudes of unregenerate "believers" who are comfortably situated in their churches and no one questions the authenticity of their faith. Belief is all that is necessary to become a Christian, but it must be a belief that changes the life. If you say that you believe, but there are no substantial changes in your life, you had better consider carefully whether you truly believe.

That is why in Jesus' preaching and indeed in the preaching of the Apostolic Church, repentance and belief are so closely bound together. Repentance plays like a musical refrain through the Book of Acts, where Paul sums up his teaching to the Ephesian elders by saying, "You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to

⁴ Adapted from Kent Hughes, Mark 1.

both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:20, 21).

Gospel preaching involves preaching repentance! Sadly, repentance has been reduced to little more than a whisper in much of today’s preaching. David McKenna, who served with such distinction as president of Seattle Pacific University, once saw a prominent preacher walk out of a sermon in which a colleague insisted that the gospel included repentance from sin. Explaining his one-man protest march, the man said that “contemporary man needs a message of hope, not fear.” That preacher spoke only half the truth. Man today needs hope, but he also needs to recognize that he is a sinner in need of forgiveness and repentance. Unless sin is acknowledged and confessed, there is no hope.

Given our contemporary materialism and sensuality, we can be sure that if Jesus began his public ministry among us today he would begin by calling us to repentance. If he walked the streets of our town, he would call us to belief, but he would also call us to cease our adulteries, repent from our materialism, renounce our gossip and our jealousies, repent from our lying. Moreover, he would do it with urgency, just as he did then, calling out, “The kingdom of God is near. The time has come.” Our text literally says that Jesus heralded this truth, calling it out loudly.

Both in Jesus’ teaching and in His example we can see a pattern in principles that every soul-winner must emulate.

1. **AVAILABILITY:** Perhaps the most astounding truth of the New Testament is that God has time for sinners. The Gospels over and over again show that Jesus was available. Incredible as it sounds, with so little time to teach and train the slow-learning disciples, Jesus was always open to those who came to Him for comfort or healing. The Gospels never record Jesus turning down a request for help. Jesus always had time to invest in others. Even while on His way to heal Jairus’ daughter, Jesus took time to heal the woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years (Mark 5:21-34).
2. **IMPARTIALITY:** One clear truth about Jesus was that He showed no favoritism. Anyone - whether poor, sick, defiled, demonized, or outcast could approach Him. And the underdogs got to Him as easily as the wealthy and powerful. You can see no difference between His reception of well known Jairus or the powerful Roman centurion versus the Samaritan woman of Sychar or the woman taken in adultery. His impartiality was a declaration of love and tenderness to those He sought to win. The woman at Sychar gives a beautiful example. She not only was a religious outcast in the eyes of Jews but was an adulteress. She had had five husbands and was then living with a man to whom she was not married. Yet Jesus firmly but gently led her to the place of faith. Through her, many other Samaritans were led to salvation (John 4:7-42).

3. **EMPATHY:** Jesus expressed one emotion more than any other, compassion. Jesus was totally sensitive to the needs of those around Him. Jesus always recognized an open heart, a repentant sinner. Jesus never was out of touch, when the crowd pressed around Him, He felt the faith of the woman who touched the hem of His garment. "Jesus turning and seeing her said, 'Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well.' And at once the woman was made well" (Matt. 9:20-22) Christ's Spirit filling us gives us Christlike empathy to make us sensitive to others, and to lead us to them or them to us.

THE POWER

Jesus said, "I will make you". It is not a trial run, a test drive. No it was a divinely energized mission. And Jesus chose four and possibly seven men in the band of disciples who were professional fishermen (see John 21:1-3). He wanted to take their strengths and weaknesses and teach them how to be His servants working in His power.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus called so many fishermen to His side? Perhaps there are many reasons. Jesus wanted to supernaturally empower some of the character qualities of a good fisherman.

1. **DILIGENCE:** Fishermen were hard working people; usually professional fishermen did not sit around doing nothing. They either sorted their catch, prepared for a catch, or mended their equipment. The Lord needs hard working people who are not afraid to work.
2. **PATIENCE:** A fisherman needs to be patient, because he knows that it often takes time to find a school of fish. Fishermen learn to wait. It certainly takes patience to win others to Christ.
3. **EXPERIENCE:** Fishermen must have good instinct for going to the right place and dropping the net at the right moment. Poor timing has lost many a catch, both of fish and of men. Fishermen must have skill; they must learn from others where to find the fish and how to catch them. Soul-winning demands skill too.
4. **PERSEVERANCE:** A fisherman must have perseverance. It is not simply a matter of waiting patiently in one place, hoping some fish will eventually show up. It is a matter of going from place to place, and sometimes back again, over and over-until the fish are found. These men had to work together, and the work of the Lord demands cooperation.
5. **COURAGE:** Commercial fishermen, certainly ones such as those on the Sea of Galilee, frequently face considerable danger from storms and various mishaps. It takes great courage to reach out of our comfort zone and try to touch a life in the name of Jesus.
6. **HUMILITY:** A good fisherman also keeps himself out of sight as much as possible. It is very easy for ourselves to get in the way of our witnessing,

causing people to turn away. A good soul-winner keeps himself out of the picture as much as possible.

7. **FAITH:** But most of all, fishing demands faith: fishermen cannot see the fish and are not sure their nets will enclose them. Soul-winning requires faith and alertness too, or we will fail. 5

THE PRIZE

One glorious morning, the whole course of history changed as Jesus came upon some fishermen as they toiled along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Verses 16 and following describe what happened:

“As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen”.

The Greek tense explains that Simon Peter and Andrew were repeatedly casting their circular nets from the sides of their boat and retrieving them when Jesus called to them with what one commentator called a “sharp military command.”

“Come, follow me ... and I will make you fishers of men” (v. 17).

When Jesus issued this challenge to the fishermen to drop their nets and follow Him we would expect a pause, some time of thinking it over, or even a hesitation. Not so, with the eye witness account of Peter through the pen of Mark we see instant obedience. Mark records Peter as saying that there was no pause, not even a second look.

“At once they left their nets and followed him” (v. 18).

What an amazing display of obedience! And to underscore it, the story continues:

“When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him” (vv. 19, 20).

These verse record what may be the most impact filled moments of obedience in history.

What did that choice mean to them? First their world expanded from life of the shores of an obscure inland lake to the widest global exposure there could ever be. When they followed Jesus that day their whole world changed! In place of Galilee came the world! John was to become Bishop of Ephesus, Peter went to Rome, and Andrew went as far as the borders of Russia! Jesus enlarged their hearts to encompass the whole world. Jesus expanded their mindsto think the

5 Drawn from Wiersbe, Warren W., *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books) 1997.

eternal. Jesus expanded their worlds to seek every creature of God's image with the Gospel of Salvation.

THE APOSTLES FISHED FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIFE

- Peter fished until he was crucified in Rome with his head down because he felt he was unworthy to die in the same manner as Christ;
- Andrew fished until he was crucified at Edessa;
- James, brother of John, fished until he was (Acts 12) slain by Herod's sword;
- John fished until he was exiled on Patmos (and some records indicate he was horribly martyred by being cast into boiling oil);
- Matthew fished until he was beheaded in Ethiopia;
- Thomas fished until he was thrust through with a spear in India;
- Simon the Zealot, fished until he was crucified in Briton;
- Thaddeus fished until he was crucified at Edessa;
- Bartholomew fished until he was beaten and crucified in India;
- Philip fished until he was crucified at Heliopolis in Phrygia;
- James the Less fished until he was clubbed to death in Jerusalem;

ARE WE FISHING?

The following⁶ widely told story is a sobering parable of what the church's concern for evangelism has often been like.

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks were frequent, a crude little life-saving station was built. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted crewmen kept a constant watch over the sea. With no thought for themselves, they went out day or night, tirelessly searching for any who might need help. Many lives were saved by their devoted efforts. After a while the station became famous. Some of those who were saved, as well as others in the surrounding area, wanted to become a part of the work. They gave time and money for its support. New boats were bought, additional crews were trained, and the station grew. Some of the members became unhappy that the building was so crude. They felt a larger, nicer place would be more appropriate as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with hospital beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Soon the station became a popular gathering place for its members to discuss the work and to visit with each other. They continued to remodel and decorate until the station more and more took on the look and character of a club. Fewer members were interested in going out on lifesaving missions, so they hired professional crews to do the work on their behalf. The lifesaving motif still prevailed on the club emblems and stationery, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club held its initiations. One day a large ship was wrecked off the

⁶ MacArthur, Matthew 4.

coast, and the hired crews brought in many boatloads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty, bruised, and sick; and some had black or yellow skin. The beautiful new club was terribly messed up, and so the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside, where the shipwreck victims could be cleaned up before coming inside. At the next meeting there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities altogether, as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted on keeping lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that, after all, they were still called a lifesaving station. But those members were voted down and told that if they wanted to save lives they could begin their own station down the coast somewhere. As the years went by, the new station gradually faced the same problems the other one had experienced. It, too, became a club, and its lifesaving work became less and less of a priority. The few members who remained dedicated to lifesaving began another station. History continued to repeat itself; and if you visit that coast today you will find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

What a striking illustration of the history of the church. Yet the work of evangelism, of spiritual lifesaving, is nonetheless the purest, truest, noblest, and most essential work the church will ever do. The work of fishing men and women out of the sea of sin, the work of rescuing people from the breakers of hell, is the greatest work the church is called by God to do.

Rescuing men from sin is God's great concern. Evangelism has been called the sob of God. Concern for the lost caused Jesus to grieve over unbelieving Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37). God sent His Son to earth-to preach, die, and be raised-for the very purpose of saving men from sin. The Father "so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him" (John 3:16-17). The Son Himself came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). The Holy Spirit gives to those who believe "the washing of regeneration and renewing" (Titus 3:5). The whole Trinity is at work in the ministry of saving mankind from sin. Evangelism is the great concern of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Forms of *evangelize* are used over fifty times in the New Testament. Jesus still is extending the same call to us as His followers. It is a call to *believe*. Do you believe? It is a call to *repent*. Do you need to repent? It is a call to *follow* him. Have you made this commitment? 7

7Hughes, R. Kent, *Preaching the Word: Mark—Jesus, Servant and Savior*, (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books) 1997.