

The Great Multitude of Fishes

by Raymond Golsworthy

The sermon emphasizes the importance of having the right objective, preparation, and secret for effective ministry, which is Christ taking over.

Scripture: Matthew 11:5, Matthew 16:18, John 6:63, John 14:14, John 21:6, Acts 1:8, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Colossians 2:10, Hebrews 4:12, Revelation 7:9

Topics: "Effective Ministry", "Spiritual Maturity"

Description

Raymond Golsworthy preaches on the significance of the miracle in John 21:1-11, the last of the eight signs in John's Gospel, which occurred after Jesus' resurrection and before His ascension. The miracle of the fishes symbolizes important principles for effective ministry: the objective of catching men, gathering a multitude for God's kingdom, and aiming for spiritual maturity in those we reach. The sermon emphasizes the need for painful preparation, letting go of self-confidence, and allowing Christ to take over in our service. It concludes with a call to balance these principles with the recognition of God's grace working through His Word and gospel, and the importance of patience in discerning true spiritual transformation.

Transcript

Reading: John 21:1-11

The miracle which we shall be considering is the last of eight signs described in John's Gospel. It took place after the resurrection, and immediately prior to the ascension of our Lord.

The record tells us that Peter and six of his friends decided to go fishing, but "that night they caught nothing." Returning to land very early the next morning, they were surprised to see a Stranger standing on the shore and calling out to them regarding their catch. When they replied, the Stranger advised them to "cast their net on the other side of the ship." It was when they did this that they gathered in the multitude of fishes, and thereupon discovered that the Stranger was none other than the risen Lord Himself.

In our consideration of this miracle, we shall bear in mind the fact that, in his Gospel, John consistently uses an unusual word for 'miracle', the word 'semeion', more frequently translated 'sign'. John evidently wants his readers to realise that the miracles he describes are more than just miracles; they are miracles with a meaning; signs carrying their own significance and as parabolic as the parables themselves. Let us now look to the Holy Spirit to lead us into some of those hidden meanings.

In the case of this miracle of the fishes, it is not really difficult to find the key. We just have to notice that John 21 stands right at the threshold of Acts, the book that gives us the story of early-church evangelists and church planting in "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Our miracle leads right on to that story, and there can be little doubt that the Lord wanted to teach His disciples special lessons at that time, principles that would help them as they moved forth to their task. Years before, He had told them that He would make them "fishers of men"; now was the time for them to launch out. But He must show them some principles first, how to be effective in their task. And that is something tremendously important to us also, for the church's responsibility today is to continue and conclude that same story, and under that same anointing!

It would be quite right to say that the Book of Acts is the 'fishing book of the New Testament'. From the beginning to the end, we see the apostles, and others, 'catching men for Christ', from both Jewish and Gentile communities; a "multitude of fishes" indeed! In the miracle now before us, the Lord is initiating them into that work, and He is illustrating before them some basic principles that would help them. Let us, then, seek to identify, and say a little about, those great principles.

In the first place, we believe our Lord was setting before His disciples the essential objective they should ever keep before them in their work; what was to be their forward-looking vision and expectation.

If we reduce to a few words what it was that took place that day, we could put it like this:

- 1) they caught
- 2) a multitude
- 3) of great fishes.

Each of these points has its own meaning for us, and, together, they show us what should be our objective as we tell out the Gospel to the world. Let us comment on those points one by one.

We are to catch men

A fisherman does not go forth to influence the fish, he must catch them! Christians are not left in this world to have a kindly effect on it, but to rescue the perishing, and to tell it of Jesus, the Mighty to save! Our objective must be to catch men, we must lift them to a new element, a new world, God's spiritual world. In ordinary fishing, of course, we bring the fish from life to death; in spiritual fishing, thank God, we lift men from death to life in Christ, and they find themselves saying, "old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

We are to gather in a multitudE

That is the church's privilege in this dispensation. We are reminded of Revelation 7:9, "I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the Throne, and before the Lamb." That, we say, is the church's privilege. The numerical contributions of individuals will vary, but we are all "labourers together" in that enterprise (1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:1), and that vision of Rev. 7:9 must be before us all. That is our objective, God's multitude! Whether we have worked in 'deserts', or in 'revival areas', we are all sharers together. That very thought will stimulate and strengthen us.

In the case of the miracle in John 21, an actual number is mentioned, a hundred and fifty three, and different ones have volunteered their thoughts about the significance of that number, but to us the simple point that matters is that the Lord knows them that are His (2 Tim. 2:19), and He writes their names in His Book of Life (Phil 4:3).

We are to catch great fishes

The original word in John 21 says that the fish that were caught on that day were 'mega' fishes, the sort that all fishermen long for! The idea, of course, is that they were mature, or full-grown fishes, something which was quite a miracle in itself.

This, of course, raises a question. Does it mean that we are to fish just for big and important people? We hasten to answer, most certainly not! Even the apostles themselves were but simple fishermen, and were referred to as "unlearned and ignorant men" (Acts 4:13). And did not the Lord Himself say, "The poor (lit. trembling) have the Gospel preached unto them" (Matt. 11:5). What, then, is the meaning here? Great fishes!

We believe that the Lord was emphasising that He wants all His fishermen to have spiritual maturity in view, wherever we may be labouring. He does not want us to be content with 'decisions', or even conversions. He wants us to have maturity and fulness in our view, to say the least. While our personal contribution may be just to 'bring people over the line', and while that may be the limit of our gift, it need not be the limit of our vision. God is seeking men and women after His own heart, those who will live like the sons and daughters of the Lord God almighty, and He is glad when His servants have the same objective. He desires a great harvest of great fishes, and to have that same vision will bring new incentives to us also, in the work we have been called to.

Before leaving this point, there is another precious thought that comes into view. We refer to the fact that all genuine believers possess an already bestowed perfection in Christ. We are told in Colossians that we "are complete in Him" (Col. 2:10), and even the disappointing Corinthians were assured that in everything they were enriched in Christ (I Cor. 1:5 RV). Paul is referring, of course, to God's view of the situation, His reckoning. From His higher viewpoint He sees us as already included in the death of the Second Man, in His resurrection, in His acceptableness in Heaven, and in His unquestionable perfections. Our standing in Christ is already unimprovable, and our state will progressively, accord to that, as we believe. (See Matt. 9:29; Rom. 6:11). Our simple point here, however, is that, even when evangelising, we can rightly assure our hearers that a 'donated' perfection in Christ will be theirs as soon as they 'move over' to the ground of trusting faith, and begin to glory only in the Cross of Christ. It is in that sense that God's fishermen can only catch great fishes. May the Lord open our eyes to these more hidden things. God's Gospel is truly a glorious Gospel (2 Cor. 4:6; 1 Tim. 1:11).

Perhaps we have already said more than enough about the motivations available to God's fishermen, all depicted in the history of John 21. By God's grace, we may be used to: catch fishes (lifting them to a new world), catch a multitude (the total harvest of Rev. 7:9), catch great fishes (all full-grown in Christ Jesus).

To really see these possibilities is to be motivated beyond all telling. All praise to our great risen Lord. (See Psalm 119:18).

The next principle depicted for us in our John 21 miracle has to do with what we shall call...

The painful preparation for effective ministry

It certainly is painful, but only God knows how rewarding, it is; praise His Name! Let us go over the ground as briefly and simply as possible.

To the casual reader, the beginning of the record indicates little or no evidence of difficulty or distress, in fact, quite the opposite, with Peter, planning to go off on a fishing trip, apparently just on his own. When he told his plan to some others of the disciples, six of them asked, or volunteered, to go with him, making it more of a normal expedition. Trouble and disappointment, however, soon overtook them, and we read that "that night they caught nothing." Then, when they were returning to the shore next morning, further troubles and embarrassments awaited them. But, before we discuss them, let us take a closer look at those few opening verses, and try to gather what would have been in Peter's mind, and in his heart, when he spoke to those other disciples about his plans.

We are not told much, but the immediately preceding history would indicate a lot. Peter was, no doubt, being increasingly haunted by memories of his own failure when he so shamefully denied Christ and declared that he had no knowledge of Him (Matt. 26:69-75). We are told that Peter "went out and wept bitterly" (verse 75), but those tears could never obliterate the tormenting memories. We know, too, that Satan is the accuser of the brethren, and we can be sure that Peter would have been his prime target at that time. And it needs to be remembered that the recent resurrection of Christ would have had a double effect on Peter. While, like the rest, he had been enormously gladdened by the wonderful triumph of his Lord, there would have been an accompanying reflex of great grief, for he had been the one who had denied that Person, now shown to be the great risen Lord of all. And we may be sure that the more the reality of the resurrection registered upon him, the more inwardly shattered he would become because of that abject failure in the Judgment Hall. Perhaps he came to realise that, in another and far deeper sense, he "knew not the Man". All those memories were now more than he could bear, but it was all part of that painful preparation we have spoken of.

As for Peter's word to his friends, "I go a-fishing", there was evidently a strong psychological factor present. A person who knows he has failed badly in some important matter will normally want to move quickly into something else, at which he is very sure he can excel. Peter knew he had failed very badly as a Christian; but who, of all the fishermen of Galilee, could gather in a great haul of fishes better than he? The very thought of that, somehow revived his drooping spirit; hence, "I go a-fishing, I am not a failure in everything!" But, as we now know, that night they caught nothing. Peter was surely learning that, for the Christian, and specially for the Christian worker, self-confidence is not to be tolerated. That, too, has to die if there is to be spiritual effectiveness! To Christ-confidence: yes, for that is another word for faith; but to self-confidence: an emphatic no!

I well remember when it first dawned on me that Christ wants to enter into everything that concerns his people, not least their normal daily occupations. The very wish to do that is matchless grace on Christ's part, but we know that whatsoever the Christian does, he is to do it in the name of the Lord Jesus (Col. 3:17). Whatever we are doing, working on a computer, repairing a car, or catching fish, for that matter, Christ is still the Head of His people, and they are the members of His body. This does not at all complicate our daily task; it is just an acquired habit of perpetual leaning. For most, that is a difficult and humiliating lesson to learn, but Christ clearly said (to those who were branches in the Vine), "apart from Me, ye can do nothing". And, for the Christian, that nothing includes our daily occupation. As our living Head, He wants to be involved with us in everything. We must learn to lean habitually! That is real

Christianity, but it requires a wound!

It is just a fact; but the Christian who wants God's best must expect God to shift his daily affairs on to a new basis, where Christ is Lord and Life of all. But, when it is safe to do so, He will show us that His way is best. We may even handle the computer better, or do better work in the garage, or even catch better fishes. He knows what will most serve our best interests, and when. There will be no loss for those that lean, as the disciples were about to learn. The preparation for that kind of effectiveness is painful in itself, but it is a very profitable pain!

Let us think for a moment, about that Stranger on the sea-shore. We say (from experience!) that the last thing an unsuccessful fisherman wants to see is an interested observer who asks questions like, "Children, have ye any meat?" With good reason, one of the translators renders it, "Any fish, boys?"; hardly the language to use, we would say, when addressing such a boat-load of professionals! But the Lord had His good and loving reasons. His far-looking preparations were going on. The disciples were kindly being brought to a very real, but necessary, zero! They were reaching rock-bottom, and that is God's own starting point with His messengers-to-be. The answer which the disciples gave to the enquiring Stranger speaks volumes; just one dismal 'no', spoken in unhappy unison. They themselves were finished, but how good it is that our Lord chooses "the things that are not, to bring to naught the things that are" (I Cor. 1:28). All glory to His Name!

We now come to the third principle which the Lord sets before us in this simple but precious story, namely...

The accomplishing secret for effective service

This has been more than implied by what we have already said and it only needs to be briefly restated. In one single word, it is a matter of Christ taking over. We notice that, at verse three, the very names of the disciples seem to disappear, and another Name takes over (verses 4,5,7). That, we are sure, is the accomplishing secret which all servants of the Lord have to learn. Christian work, basically, is the work of Christ Himself. The following verses alone should make that point fully clear:

Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

"Striving according to His working which works mightily in me" (Col. 1:29).

"I laboured ... yet not I, but the grace of God" (1 Cor. 15:10).

"Whatsoever ye do, do all in the Name of the Lord Jesus"; i.e. in union with Him, as the members of His body (Col. 3:17).

We can only repeat, then, that effective ministry is the working of the living Christ Himself, operating in and through those who are His members.

It has been said that 'The Acts of the Apostles' should have been named 'The Acts of the Ascended Christ'. In verse one, the writer refers to a former treatise (Luke's Gospel) which describes what Jesus began to do and to teach until the time He went back to Heaven. The inference is that this later treatise now continues that same story, telling what the same Christ did after He was enthroned. So, both Luke's Gospel and The Acts are describing the Lord's doings, and they are marvellous in our eyes (Ps. 118:23).

In the light of all we have been saying, how gracious it was of the Lord to say, right at the end, "Bring of the fish that ye have now caught" (John 21:10); just typical of all His ways!

Summary

Looking back over what we have sought to present in these paragraphs, we might summarise what we have said as follows. We are ever grateful to God for this particular 'sign-miracle', set before us by our risen Lord, just prior to His ascension, and the launching of His program for world evangelism, and the building of His church. It certainly contains vital lessons which needed to be learned by His chosen servants at that time, and which need to be inwrought also in those of us who are privileged to continue, and conclude, that same undertaking.

Three such lessons, or principles, have been noted from the story, and emphasised in our consideration.

- 1) We have seen what the Lord wants to be our objective, or target, as we engage in this ministry (2 Cor. 4:1).
- 2) We have learned what is to be the necessary preparation, inwardly, if we are to be the kind of servants that God wants for this task. We called it a painful preparation, for He must bring us to a real zero; our flesh profits nothing in this task (John 6:63; John 12:24).
- 3) We have seen that He, really, is the One who does the work. He builds His church, graciously working through His incorporated members. He catches the great multitude of great fishes, and we can only say "to Him be the glory" (Matt. 16:18; Matt. 12:18).

The right balance

There are now a few closely related thoughts which have to be mentioned, thoughts essential to a balanced perception of these things, and thoughts which may specially help those who feel, and know, that God's work does go on where there has been little or no preparation of the kind we have spoken of. We certainly agree with that, for God is always gracious, and there are also these other factors which do have a bearing.

- 1) God's Word itself is also his powerful servant, and often does its work quite independently of the spiritual state of the person who is handling it. (See Heb. 4:12; Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23.) And the same is true of God's gospel (See Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 4:15; 1 Thess. 1:5).
- 2) Also, it is a fact that any and every born-again Christian will have at least something of these principles, including that distressful undoing of Peter, working within them. It may be only to a small degree, but God knows that degree, and will graciously act in proportion to it. Something of Christ is there, and that something will do its (His) work.

Then, as well, it does need to be mentioned that Christians should always be careful not to confuse mental and emotional changes with actual New Birth! Those changes may indicate that the Holy Spirit is stirring, but they are not yet spiritual results. By all means, let us ever be hopeful, and give whatever encouragement we can, but let us be patient too.

We repeat that only the Lord "knows those who are His" (2 Tim. 2:19), and He is the One who really knows who are His sheep (John 10:14). Hence, the wisdom of leaving all 'counting' to the Lord. Time will

surely tell.

In the mean time, let us humbly embrace those principles indicated for us in that helpful 'sign-miracle' of the fishes, and, in keeping...

1) Let us ask the Lord for the great multitude (Rev. 7:9).

2) Let us accept any preparations He knows are necessary (John.12:24).

3) Let us thank God that Christ is the unceasing Worker (John 5:17) and He will build His church in His own time and way (Matt. 16:18).

Thank God, Christ has said "If ye ask ... I will do" (John 14:14).

May the Lord bless us all richly as we prayerfully ponder over these great things. May we heed the word of Paul to young Timothy: "Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them, that thy profiting may appear to all." May the dear Lord help us.

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