

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 143

Fishers of Men

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 20th April, 1997**

Text: “*And Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men. And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed Him*” (Luke 5. 10, 11).

What wonderful days these were when it “came to pass, that, ... the people pressed upon Him to hear the Word of God,” as He stood by the Lake of Gennesaret! You think of the sacredness, the blessedness, of those days, the people so eager, so earnest, longing for the Word of God, and they pressed upon Him that they might hear it. It would be a wonderful thing in our country, in our chapels, if those days were to come again. But I believe a few of you here know something of the spirit of this in your hearts: not just to come to chapel, but to *press upon the Lord* to hear the Word of God.

“He saw two ships standing by the lake: but the fishermen were gone out of them, and were washing their nets. And He entered into one of the ships.” That is divine sovereignty. “He saw two ships ... and He entered into one of the ships, which was Simon’s, and prayed him that he would thrust out a little from the land.” That point did strike me: the humility, the condescension, if you will the courtesy, of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, He who is Lord of all, speaking to a poor, sinful man, and *praying him* that he would thrust out a little from the land. There is not any excuse for rudeness and abruptness. The Lord Jesus never spoke like that. “Never man spake like this Man” – so kindly, so tenderly. Mind you, no-one ever spoke more solemnly, but there was never unkindness in it. He prayed him, prayed a poor sinful man. He “prayed him that he would thrust out a little from the land. And He sat down, and taught the people out of the ship.”

“Now when He had left speaking, He said unto Simon, Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught.” That is a clear commandment; that is clear leading; that is clear teaching. And there will be times in your life, if you are a true disciple, a true follower of the Lord Jesus, when He will give you a commandment, when He will direct you to

walk in a certain pathway. “Launch out into the deep.” It may be even this morning He is saying something like that to someone here: “Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught.”

What the Lord said to Simon Peter puzzled him, if not offended him. He could not understand it. It did not seem to be right. He had been toiling all night fishing. Peter knew the sea well and he knew the night-time was the best time, but he had toiled all night and caught nothing. There will be times when the Lord bids you walk in a certain pathway and it is contrary to sense and reason. But the Lord Jesus had not made a mistake. He never has; He never will. But these ways at times the Lord leads you – perhaps not always by a clear word, perhaps it is the constraining – but at times it will be contrary to sense and reason, contrary to your own desire, not something you really want.

O you see the obedience of faith and the submission of faith: “Nevertheless at Thy word I will let down the net.” I think at times some of us know something of the spirit of Peter. The Lord has bidden us go a certain way and perhaps our flesh has shrunk from it and perhaps we would rather not, and perhaps it does not seem right, and perhaps we cannot understand it. But to be blessed with the obedience of faith, to be blessed with the humble submission of faith: “Nevertheless at Thy word I will let down the net.” In other words, Lord, Thou knowest best. In other words, Lord, I am foolish, ignorant, sinful. In other words, Lord, if Thou dost say it, it must be right, though I do not understand it.

“Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at Thy word I will let down the net.” Also, it means this: “Jesus Christ, your Father’s Son, bids you undismayed go on.” You have not to give up. You have not to turn back. These are sad, dark, solemn days for gospel preachers and so often it is this with us: “Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing.” “I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought.” But O to hear the Lord kindly saying, “Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught,” and to be enabled to go on.

“Nevertheless at Thy word I will let down the net.” And then, beloved friends, it is not just preachers. What about those of you with your prayers? You have kept on praying and praying and praying, perhaps for spiritual blessings, perhaps for a providential answer, perhaps for someone

you love, perhaps in some perplexity and sorrow in your life, and where are you this morning? “Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing.” Are you going to stop praying? Are you going to go to the mercyseat no more? “Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught.” May you know the obedience, the submission of faith.

“Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at Thy word I will let down the net. And when they had this done, they inclosed a great multitude of fishes: and their net brake.” God will always honour faith. God will always honour obedience. God will always honour submission to His holy will.

“When they had this done, they inclosed a great multitude of fishes: and their net brake.” Now of course, this was a miracle. I do like to speak on the miracles of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, because it is this same Jesus, “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and for ever,” who is the same this morning: His power the same, His understanding the same, His compassion the same, His kindness the same. These miracles of the Lord Jesus so clearly set forth His divine Person, the Son of God. With Him nothing is impossible. He needs but to speak and all these fishes are there. He is the Creator of all things. He upholds all things. He is the Lord of all things. He only needs to speak, and there is that divine power, that drawing power, and it brings the multitude of fishes where Peter’s boat was. The divine power of the incarnate Son of God. But have you noticed that these miracles of the Lord Jesus were miracles of kindness and mercy and tenderness and love, apart from the cursing of the barren fig tree, but that was an inanimate thing? But in dealing with people, His miracles were always miracles of kindness. Peter and his friends were weary and hungry. They were poor. They needed this. What it really is: “My every need He richly will supply.” The Lord Jesus reveals Himself here, Jehovah Jireh, the Lord will provide. “My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”

“And when they had this done, they inclosed a great multitude of fishes: and their net brake. And they beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them. And they came, and filled both the ships.” It is a wonderful thing when the Lord’s people walk together in love and union and harmony, and it is a wonderful thing when the churches walk together in love and union and harmony.

There is not so much of this today, is there? Whenever I read this scripture, I think of when I was a young boy. It was the anniversary services at a little chapel called Salem in Accrington. There were very few attended, and like all the Lancashire anniversaries, they held the three services on the Lord's day. On the Saturday evening, they received a telegram. They had a well-known, popular preacher coming and they had a telegram that he could not come. The godly old deacon, John Gillett, was so distressed. They managed to get someone different for the morning, afternoon and evening. Different churches gave up their ministers. I think the whole of our congregation in sympathy went down in the evening, and other places did, so that the chapel was full. Before the minister began his sermon, he said, "Whilst I have been sitting here, one scripture has been on my spirit: 'They beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them. And they came.'" Now it would be a wonderful thing if there were more of that spirit abroad among our churches today.

"When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord." At first this seems very strange to us, that Peter should tell the Lord Jesus to go away, to depart from him. Surely it is the wicked, the ungodly, who say, "Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways." But try to understand Peter. It was this: brought face to face with the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the beauty of His character, His spotless, sacred humanity, and then the revelation of His Godhead, he was prostrated by a sense of his sin and guilt. If you and I ever have dealings with the Lord Jesus, there will be that sense of unworthiness and sin and guilt. You will sink into nothing. You will fall down. There is something solemnly amiss with a religion that can have plenty to do with the Lord Jesus and there is still pride and self-righteousness and creature zeal. If you come into vital contact with the sacred Person of the Son of God, you are overwhelmed with a sense of your unworthiness and ruin and guilt, and you fall prostrate at His feet.

"When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord." He felt all right before. He did not altogether realise who the Lord Jesus is, but once there had been this clear revelation, he sinks into nothing. He does not see any way in which he and the Lord Jesus can go on together – Peter, a lost, ruined, vile sinner, and the Lord Jesus, "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from

sinners, and made higher than the heavens.” He just cannot see how they can walk together.

There was an event in ancient English history when King Alfred the Great was escaping from the Danes and was in hiding in disguise. He met with a very poor man who was also escaping, and the poor man did not realise it was the king. The two of them were together for some weeks and they became bosom friends. They walked together in love and union. Then one day some of King Alfred’s followers found them and immediately fell down and hailed him as their king. The poor man shrank in horror and fell down at the feet of King Alfred. “Who am I, a poor man, being so familiar with my king?” It was the spirit: “Depart from me; for I am a sinful man.” He said, “Your lordship, now we must separate for ever. I must go back to my humble ways and you must go back to rule over the realm.”

The spirit of Peter here was something like that. But Peter was to learn more of the spirit of the gospel. He was still on legal ground. Peter was to learn that when a man sinks at Jesus’ feet, conscious of his sins, it does not mean the Lord Jesus will depart from him – rather the opposite. “This Man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.” No sinner ever perished at the Saviour’s feet. “There humbly fall before His feet, for none can perish there.”

“For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the draught of the fishes which they had taken.” I believe this and I have often said this to you, that if your religion and mine is real, often there will be a sense of astonishment, a sense of wonder and amazement. Have you ever felt this: astonishment at the greatness, the power, the glory of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, astonishment at the riches of His mercy, His kindness, His tenderness, His compassion, astonishment at the things He can do, the things He has done? Have you ever gone to Calvary and looked with astonishment at a dear, dying Saviour, astonishment that He could ever take notice of such a sinner as you feel yourself to be? O to have a religion of gracious astonishment!

“Why was I made to hear Thy voice,
And enter while there’s room;
When thousands make a wretched choice,
And rather starve than come?”

That is a religion of astonishment. You will have a *why me?* religion if your religion is real.

“And Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not.” That is the answer. No need to depart from Me, Peter. “Depart from Thee? – ’tis death – ’tis more; ’tis endless ruin, deep despair!” Fear not, Peter; no need to depart; no need to leave Me. Rather, “Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” It is the law that drives you. It is the devil that drives you. The gospel graciously draws. “Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not.” May some of you who have dealings with the Lord, who fear to presume, who fear because of your unworthiness and weakness, who fear you will have to depart and depart for ever, may you this morning hear that voice of love and mercy: “Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not.” O may it be, “Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine.” May it be, “Fear thou not; for I am with thee; be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of My righteousness.”

“Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men.” This was Peter’s call to the ministry. He was to be a fisher of men. It is a beautiful analogy, isn’t it? The Word of God is the gospel net and it is cast out into the sea. And then as the gospel net is cast into the sea, there are some who are securely caught in the gospel net, and the great point of it is that they might be gathered in. It is unto Him, unto Jesus, unto heaven at last, that the gathering of the people shall be. And so the preaching of the everlasting gospel is compared to a man casting his net into the sea and gathering in fishes. The great difference, the vital difference is that, naturally, when the fish are caught in the net, it is unto death but, spiritually, when sinners are caught in the gospel net, it is unto life, eternal life. Of course, it is unto death first of all, death to sin and self and any hope of heaven under the law, and death to the world and your past life, that you might live unto God. “Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men.” On the Day of Pentecost, Peter caught a lot more fishes than ever he did on this wonderful night by the Sea of Galilee.

“Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men.” The famous Thomas Boston has a book entitled, *The Art of Soul Fishing*. But they say the golden rule for any fisherman (I do not know anything whatsoever about fishing) but the golden rule is that he must keep himself out of sight.

“We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake.”

“Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men.” And from that day to this, sinners are being securely caught in the gospel net and gathered in. But the point is this: it is not just the fisherman casting forth the net into the sea. That is all we can do. All the preacher can do is cast forth the gospel net into the sea. We need that unseen power, that vital power, that almighty power of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to draw these fishes into the net that they might be caught there and safely brought to land. I wonder how many of you have been caught in the gospel net. Week by week, month by month, year by year we try Lord’s day morning and evening to throw forth the gospel net into the waters. There are a lot of you have got very clever at eluding it and swimming the other way. You young ones, have any of you been caught in the gospel net, or have you learnt the power, the art, of keeping out of the way, swimming away from it? It is a solemn thing if it is week by week and month by month and year by year that the net is cast and you are never drawn into it; you always elude it.

“Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men.” Whenever I hear this expression, being caught in the gospel net, I think of a most wonderful event at the time of the glorious Reformation. There was a very humble young man. He was a very fearful, timid man, a little man called Thomas Bilney. The Lord had blessed him with a knowledge of the truth, and day by day he saw an eminent Roman Catholic priest passing him, a great man, a brilliant man, an orator. He thought that if only that man were blessed with grace, what a blessing he would be to the cause of God and truth. It seemed impossible, but he prayed for it. Do you ever do this? He thought if only this man were touched, there would not be anybody like him on the side of God and truth, the side of the Reformation. So he laboured in prayer, and then one day he felt he must speak to him, and he trembled and shrank from it. He thought this man would spurn him, turn him away. Suddenly, an idea came into his mind. He said, “I will ask that priest if he will hear my confession. I will go into the confessional box and ask him to hear my confession.” So he went up to this proud, vain, eminent priest, and the priest took him into a confessional box. Thomas Bilney knelt down in the confessional box. He said, “This is my confession,” and gave an account of the Lord’s gracious dealings with him in love and mercy.

Every word he spoke, the Holy Ghost sovereignly, powerfully applied to the heart of that proud priest. When he came out, Bilney went home. He did not know what had happened. But John Foxe wrote that Hugh Latimer (that was his name) was firmly caught in the gospel net, and wriggle as he would, he could not get out of it. Wasn't Hugh Latimer a blessing to the cause of God and truth, at last, as an old man burnt to death at the stake? But John Foxe said he was "caught in the gospel net."

May we pray for it, you pray for it, I pray for it, that sinners might be found in the gospel net. You will find this, and I think it is a point not often touched on. Often when the Lord first catches a person in the gospel net, that one wriggles and tries to get out. Sometimes you read in books as if the Lord begins His work and that is it. I know when the Lord began with me, I wriggled and tried to get out and go back to the world and my old ways, but the Lord will have the last word. O pray that sinners might be caught in the gospel net and securely brought to land, and O pray that you yourself may not elude the net, that you might be found in it, gathered in it, brought safely to heaven at last.

"Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men. And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed Him." That was Peter's religion. And these others mentioned here, James and John, that was their religion. There is not much of this religion about today. There is plenty of profession, but not much of this dying to self and dying to the world, dying to your past life, taking up your cross, following the Saviour, going forth unto Him without the camp bearing His reproach. "Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season." But this is real religion, its gracious effect, its separating effect, its sanctifying effect. "When they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed Him." It was an immediate work. They did not leave it until tomorrow, or next week, or until they were old. The Lord had spoken to them, dealt with them, shown them mercy, and immediately, "when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed Him." And that is what it is to be a follower of the meek and lowly Jesus. First of all, to follow Him by faith in His goings forth "from of old, from everlasting," to follow Him to Bethlehem and through His sacred life, to Gethsemane, to Calvary, to the Mount of Olives, to see Him ascend into heaven, to follow Him and rest your everlasting all there.

“Dear Jesus, my Saviour, Thy truth I embrace –
Thy name and Thy natures, Thy Spirit and grace;
And trace the pure footsteps of Jesus, my Lord,
And glory in Him whom proud sinners abhorred.”

That is vital, living faith. That is to be a follower of Jesus.

“They forsook all, and followed Him.” And then secondly there is that following Him in the narrow way which leads to heaven. Do you ever have to deny yourself, deny your lusts, deny your own selfish desires? Is there any sacrifice for Christ’s sake? What about “all on the altar”? What about going that second mile? “They forsook all, and followed *Him*.” And that is the vital point. “These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.” They followed *Him*. It is on my spirit to close this morning with two verses from well-known hymns.

“Jesus calls us! o’er the tumult
Of this life’s tempestuous sea,
Day by day His sweet voice calleth,
Saying, ‘Christian, follow Me.’”

And the other:

“In simple trust like theirs who heard,
Beside the Syrian sea,
The gracious calling of the Lord,
Let us, like them, without a word
Rise up and follow Thee.”

“They forsook all, and followed Him.